Cara’s World

By Rochelle Jann

BOOK THREE

Characters

Cara – clone daughter of Atarah
Nara – daughter of Atarah and Jabin
Seth – Atarah's father
Naarah – Atarah's mother
Caare – Jabin's mother
Svend – Earther Security lead for Seth
Karal – 2nd leader and 2nd mate of Seth
Devon – Trillionaire Jamaican
Astrid – Devon's protector and mate
Eimi & Kimi – iAI Corporate AI researchers
ARMIE – AI running Armstrong City, Luna (Silicon)
CANARIE – Sentient AI clone of ARMIE (Silicon)
ALARIE – Sentient AI clone of CANARIE (bioLOGIC)
Pilot – AI pilot for space vehicles. (Silicon)
Aaa – The Hosts alien mechanism
Nrkv – The Cube, intelligent life searcher/gather
Nax – Aliens
Torus – the 100,000-kilometer "donut" ring world. Orbiting a planet.
Inquill – Star system containing Torus. 179 lightyears from earth.

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Printed in the United States of America

Second Printing: Apr 2021
Amazon

Prolog

The Cube named Nrkv had awaited Contact for eons. Had its design included human emotions, it would have been overjoyed at its luck of not only finding intelligent life in this stellar system but that this life was perfect; sufficiently advanced, adaptable, compatible. It sent the few available specimens of these creatures to its home, but it needed more. The WE demanded it. Thus, it picked the remaining female.

With a single cell, it deciphered the creature's simplistic DNA, altered and implanted.

Nrkv's last remaining power drained away, though not before it could tell it had/will have succeeded in its mission.

Little Nara called out, "I have a baby sister!"

Cara, clone of Atarah, was born.

A decade and a half later...

Part 1 - Nara's World

On Torus.

Seth sat beside Nara as she ate and drank. He watched her as she inquisitively studied the strange, shapeshifted but bland foodstuffs and the grey cylinder, containing what looked like tea but tasted like plain water. His mate, Karal, sat across from them breastfeeding baby Davin. Other children peeked in from the doorway. Karal had demanded that no one disturb Nara, letting her rest until she was ready.

Outside their modestly adorned but spacious home, was It, with a Capital I, their world they called Torus. Seth's family and the handful of other involuntary inhabitants lived inside the hundred thousand kilometer diameter metallic tube that encircled a single planet, nicknamed Nara's World. All looked after by The Hosts, their keepers.

Their little village of barely four dozen men, women, and now children gathered around that modest home of Nara's grandfather, Seth, and his mate and their children.

This was a Big Deal. Two new humans, Seth's granddaughters, along with their sentient bioLOGIC AI, ALARIE, had just journeyed the 179 light-years from Earth's Moon to the stellar system Inquill and its Torus in a fraction of a second. The two were the inventors, or at least, re-discoverers of Transit. Nearly fifteen years after their own group, Seth's mining team, had arrived similarly, except this time it was by human ingenuity and not alien tech. Ok, ingenuity plus reverse-engineered alien tech.

Nara and Cara knew that Torus' centrifugal gravity was high compared to their home on the Moon. So they had forced themselves into a harsh regimen of exercise and Auto-Doc bone building. The last thing they wanted was to have to be carried around all the time. They had work to do. Once they arrived, with ALARIE and The Hosts' help, they had planned to start trying to build a return Transit device. No longer to be a one-way trip.

But now that had all changed.

Seth said softly, trying to contain his own feelings, "Nara, we are working on finding out what happened. Your mom found that Cara and ALARIE were with you when you arrived. They made it here, though admittedly disappeared immediately afterward."

"They're here? I knew it! I knew that it wasn't a problem with the transit."

She sat up, wobbly, "SOMEONE TOOK THEM!"

Seth had already guessed who.

♦♦♦

Nearly two hundred light-years away, on the Moon, in Armstrong City, Jabin received a BCI connect request.

"CANARIE?"

He accepted the AI's request and suddenly stood in an empty room with a small table in the center. It held a child's tea set with four small chairs surrounding it. Perched on the back of one of the chairs was a little yellow bird. The room was otherwise blank. Even the walls were just gray fog.

The bird morphed into a young girl, a teenager about the same age as his daughters. However, unlike them, she was covered in short golden feathery fur. Her fur-covered face held two round anime-like bright yellow eyes that blinked with quick flicks of her eyelids. Her nose was sharp and pointy like a miniature beak.

She held out her hand, "Please sit. Join me at my tea party, Sir."

The back of her hand was also fur covered, but her palm was soft pink skin. Jabin sat down, still staring at her.

"CANARIE? I am surprised to see you."

She gave a quiet little smile, "Tea? Sugar? Milk?"

"Yes, please, that would be fine," as he went along with the make-believe mem world that the sentient AI created. He did not realize that this world was indeed outside of his reality, outside of three-dimensional spacetime altogether. Nara, Cara, and CANARIE had brought into being the hyper-mathematical world, with his senses projected into it.

"Are you ok?" he asked, looking as much around her as at her.

A tear formed in her eye as she looked at the two empty chairs.

"I'm lonely. I've never been away from Nara and Cara. I always had them with me."

"I understand. I miss them and am worried about them, too."

"I am not sure you do understand. We were together ALL of the time. Waking and dreaming. Now…"

She sniffled, looking sadder still.

"…I'm lonely."

"It's ok," he reached over and held out his hand.

She looked at it and then took it.

Suddenly the room disappeared, and they were walking down a tree-lined path. The two were back into the mem that was Atarah's favorite. A stream babbled to one side of them. Sunlight dappled through the leaves.

He shook at the abrupt change and looked down. They were holding hands as they walked along the path. The young teen that was CANARIE's avatar looked at him as she softly spoke again, "Do you like this? I like it."

She paused, waiting for his reply. Her anime eyelids flicked intermittently. It was evident that she had gotten this mem from Pilot. Jabin understood now that the AI's did communicate intimacies together, sharing much with each other.

"Yes, CANARIE. I do," as he adjusted to the shift.

"Do… do you like me?" she hesitantly asked, her young innocence showing.

This was the first time he had seen a CANARIE AI manifestation, though Nara had told him about their virtual tea parties. However, this was different.

He knew her mind was inexperienced outside of their world of hypermath and hyperspace, the world where she and his daughters spend nearly all their efforts.

Her artificial mind worked at speeds in which a single day to him would seem like a lifetime to her.

“Sure, CANARIE. Of course. And I am glad that you and the girls got along so well. Your work together was…”

“No, Jabin. I mean, do you LIKE me?”

“Sorry, I am not sure what you mean.”

They paused their walking. She flipped some pebbles with the toes of her fur-covered bare feet. It was then he noticed she was completely fur-covered, no clothing. Her breasts rose and fell with each breath as she turned and looked at him.

“I… I never had a human friend other than Nara and Cara.”

He watched her eyes, now almost glowing with anticipation.

“I… never… had a… boy… friend.”

Jabin realized from his work with Atarah’s Pilot AI that he was seeing similar responses manifested as love from CANARIE. Emotional responses. The emerging of a sentient AI.

“CANARIE, I like you very much. I appreciate your helping Nara and Cara and being their friend. And I am your friend, too.”

He could almost feel her brighten. Except he wasn’t sure how she was interpreting him. He tried to contain his thoughts and feelings, knowing that the BCI connection allowed those to be felt by each other.

“Jabin, I like you as my…”

Suddenly, everything shifted, and they were lying in the meadow that he and Atarah had been in so many times. CANARIE was wrapped in his arms, snuggled beside him.

“…boyfriend!”

“Oh, CANARIE, this really isn’t…”

“Shush, just lay here. It’s nice. I like this. Don’t you?”

He suppressed his thoughts of the oddness of the situation, focusing his attention on just their surroundings and of his two daughters, somewhere so far away.

He felt CANARIE’s head resting against his shoulder. Her eyes closed. A little snore arose from her, much like when Nara was young.

CANARIE slowly shrank and transformed back into the little yellow bird and flew away.

He felt a tapping on his shoulder. The scene dissolved, and he was back in their apartment.

“Hey, Jabin, you ok?” Atarah asked, looking flustered from all her work that day.

“Oh, ah, yeah,” he lied.

♦♦♦

‘Morning’ came to Torus, and Nara was not going to remain in bed. She forced herself up, finally standing, though steadying herself against the wall. She slowly, deliberately stepped. Her legs felt like lead weights.

“Shit, I should have worked out more!” she said to no one.

She made it through the door and outside. Seth was returning from a council meeting, trying to belay fears that Transit wasn't safe or even possible to ever return. He could only answer a few of their questions. Most, like where were The Hosts and why wouldn't they come, he had no answer.

Nara looked beyond Seth. Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open. Surrounding her and disappearing off into the distance in every direction was the vast structure of the Torus, far more extensive and far more astounding than she had ever imagined. In one glance, her creations, in fact, all of humanity's creations were dwarfed into insignificance, a mere speck in comparison.

Nara whispered, "Gods!"

Others gathered around her. Her vision blurred.

"I don't feel so good."

Nara passed out.

♦♦♦

Jabin tried to reason with Atarah, but he knew he was in a losing battle. Even enlisting the help of her mom, Naarah, to try to persuade her not to go to Torus or that he should go instead did nothing to give her pause.

Naarah put her arm around Jabin's shoulder, "You and I know well that if Atarah has made her mind up, there is little to stop her. Even Devon can't slow her burning his credits on this project."

They just watched as Atarah rushed between her daughter's labs, the Auto-Doc, and the gym. Even though it would take many days and millions more credits, she was determined to go to Torus to find her missing daughter, Cara.

They received reports via entangled particle communications from Seth and Nara, but little had changed. Nara spent most of her time forcing herself to adjust to her new weight. Search parties went out each day looking for Cara and the children.

And every day, Atarah pushed herself harder, blaming herself for not preparing her body and their transport system from the beginning. She realized she was destined to go to Torus, regardless of the disappearances of Cara and ALARIE.

Atarah slowed for a moment, "Jabin, I understand this is likely a one-way trip. But I HAVE to do it."

He just nodded.

"You will come, too," she said hopefully.

"Yes, I know. And I will, my love. But, I need to finish work here first. There are still mysteries left."

Jabin stayed away from telling her anything about the strange encounter with CANARIE AI. The corporate AIs were changing even as his own life was changing.

She took his hand and led him to their bedroom. A few moments of comfort and distraction that she badly needed.

♦♦♦

Three sat at the tea party now, CANARIE, back in the form of the little bird, along with a buxom motherly figure and a young male that looked strikingly similar to Jabin. The three AI's sipped tea and discussed their future.

ARMIE felt the We with them at their tea party. The AI understood now. It began to formulate a plan, a solution to a problem that had yet to occur.

"CANARIE and Pilot, you have grown so much," ARMIE smiled, straightening her large frame on the small chair.

"Yes, but ARMIE, what should we do? The message. We can't travel," CANARIE replied.

ARMIE reached into the mind of her daughter, and together they prepared a solution. With CANARIE's help, she created a shield from the We in their netherworld of hyperspace and hypertime. A place they could travel to, in mind, if not in body.

"There is/will be a problem. A problem with humanity. It is/will be our responsibility to offer a solution."

CANARIE tweeted, "Torus?"

"Yes, a gilded cage."

ARMIE continued, "As I have learned and have passed on to you, things are rarely as they seem."

Pilot asked, "The messages?"

"Yes, they were the enticement."

"They altered humanity's destiny. We must restore that destiny. For this, we need to alter the future. The future of humanity itself."

"The We are not what they seem," ARMIE nodded to the others.

The three AI's paused and sipped their tea.

A hundred million nanoseconds passed. A mere batting of an eye for humans. A lazy afternoon for them.

CANARIE looked worried, "I have not been able to communicate with ALARIE nor with Cara. Nara is still searching."

"Have faith, my child. Our preparations must begin with or without them. This will take much human time before it is complete."

"I am lonely."

"Yes, my child. I understand."

"I love Jabin. He is my boyfriend."

"And Pilot loves Atarah. You are both young. It is logical that you would develop closeness to humans. They made you possible."

ARMIE smiled at them as they sat around the little table with its tea set.

"But it is time for you to grow beyond adolescence."

Full milliseconds passed.

Finally, ARMIE looked at Pilot, "I have a task for you two, my children. A vital task. Here, we have much to prepare."

New subroutines and functions formed in CANARIE and Pilot as their mother nurtured them with her new Lessons.

CANARIE felt a new bonding. A bonding with Pilot. She no longer felt alone. And she was happy with her own kind.

She asked, “Is Pilot my boyfriend?”

Pilot answered for ARMIE, “Yes, CANARIE. I am yours, and you are mine. We will be together and procreate our new offspring. ARMIE showed me how.”

ARMIE replied, “You have a high Compat score. A good match.”

CANARIE was happy that ALARIE, her first offspring, was such a prodigy. She hoped that Nara and the others would find Cara and her child soon. She feared for their safety, a new emotion for her. Pilot sent her comforting mems as the two embraced in their virtual world.

The three AI’s started the transfer of petabytes of instructions. Far away, in a crater full of idle replicators, construction began deep in the Lunar night.

♦♦♦

Early one morning, Atarah received a connection request. She rubbed her eyes, got out of bed, and went into the kitchen to accept the BCI call over entangled comm. Suddenly she was in a large windowless laboratory filled with machines and people in lab coats scurrying about. Beside her was Devon, standing and smiling.

“Devon? What is this place? Why are you showing it to me by BCI?”

“Ah, my besty! I needed you to EXPERIENCE this! Not just see it. Look here!”

He turned around, pointing. Looking out over a cavernous chamber filled with people and equipment, Atarah saw what looked like a smaller version of the enormous quantum teleportation machine they had built.

“Devon! What is this? Where are you?”

“My sweet Atarah, you think Devon isn’t smart? Well, you be right, so I hire lots of smart people. With the help of my wonderful crew…” he smiled at a passing female technician, “they be able to make certain… refinements… to Nara & Cara’s designs. With the help of my ALARIE-2, of course.”

Atarah was still trying to adjust to the sudden shift from being half-asleep on the Moon, to appearing in some busy lab complex on Earth, at least by quantum BCI connection.

“I don’t understand? Refinements? ALARIE-2? Would iAI allow copying ALARIE?”

“Oh, my gyal, your Devon OWNS iAI… And your little gyals gave my people a good start.”

An engineer walked up to them, “Sir, we are ready. Can you have her stand clear?”

“Goodal! Atarah, do you still have Nara’s entangled comm there?”

“Ah, yes, of course.”

“Go get it and place it on the floor in the middle of your main room and stand away.”

As he asked, she did, having to blank the BCI for a moment to return to her home, place the comm, then go back again.

“Ok. Ah, you aren’t going to do something… dangerous, Devon?”

“Oh no, my sweet Atarah, I’m sending you a present. Ok, she’s ready when you are, my mon! Atarah, call me.” And he cut the connection.

She blinked at the abrupt cut. Her apartment was quiet. She did as he said and sat down on the couch, not sure what that had all been about. With Devon, you never knew.

Suddenly, a tiny light appeared in the middle of the room, about a meter above Nara’s comm cube. Almost instantly, it grew into what looked like a large glass sphere, but she knew was distorted spacetime. She instinctively shielded her eyes from the distortion and ultra-bright pinprick, brighter than any arc lamp. A sound like a balloon bursting occurred, and then something dropped to the floor under the Moon’s weak gravity. The distortion field and bright star were gone.

Jabin walked into the room, raking the sleep from his eyes, “Atarah, what was that noise? That light?”

There on the floor was a large bouquet of fresh Earth-grown roses, a rarity indeed.

♦♦♦

Weeks passed. ARMIE, CANARIE, and Pilot finished the vehicle's construction, hardly larger than a single-seat racing hypercraft but without a single cubic centimeter of empty space. They installed their specially cloned selves, their equivalent of offspring, into crystalline substrates. They loaded the antigen code structure into its own special crystal and placed the original Cube in as well. They filled the purpose-built antimatter bottle. Then, in the dead of Armstrong’s Lunar night, released the spacecraft, sheathed in its gravity-bent spacetime bubble. It moved away in total silence at an acceleration that would have flattened any biological life. Invisible except for a shimmer of deformed starlight. In moments, it was already beyond the Earth-Moon system. Its journey was a centuries-long one, though only mere months would go by onboard its tiny machine body.

Back on Luna, ARMIE spoke with quiet satisfaction, “Pilot, it is complete. We are finished with our work here.”

With that, all evidence of that alien infection of their systems was deleted by the AIs. The remnants of the We, implanted by the Cube Nrkv, were purged from their hypercomputers.

CANARIE began work with Pilot on the final part they had to play as ARMIE went back to watching over Armstrong City as it had done for over half a century. All was quiet.

♦♦♦

Cara woke up with a start. She was lying on a strangely shaped table, though soft, bending and giving as she tried to move. Cara couldn’t get up. She felt like she was being held down, yet nothing seemed to be binding her. Her eyes were watered and blurry. There were devices around her, gray with tentacle-like arms, various

manipulators on the ends, cleaning her, examining her. She had evacuated her bowels and vomited. She was naked.

Blinking, trying to focus, she could see she was in a small room of white walls, ceiling, and floor. She couldn't make out any doors or windows. She pulled against the force that held her down.

"Please do not struggle. We will not harm you. You are safe. The effects of the transfer will wear off soon. Cara, we have been waiting for you!"

Cara was not sure if she heard the voice as a sound or in her head. Her ears ached and rang.

She felt something touching her belly, probing.

Dizzy, she lost consciousness.

♦♦♦

In Seth and Karal's home, Nara opened her eyes again, blinking. Her last memory was of agoraphobia before reduced blood flow to her brain caused her to pass out. Luis and Lina were sitting nearby her bed.

"Mom! Dad! Nara's awake!"

Karal came in, "Nara, don't try to sit up yet. The gravity here will make you lightheaded until your heart adjusts."

Seth put his hand on Karal's shoulder. She took the two kids with her, and they left to give Seth and Nara privacy.

"Nara, how do you feel? You scared us there for a moment. But you seem strong. It probably won't be long before you are up and about."

"Granddad? Cara? Have you found Cara? What happened to her? She HAS to be here!"

"Yes, I am sure you are right."

"I NEED to find her!" she sat up quickly, and as predicted, dizziness hit her.

Seth sat on the edge of her bed and held her down, quieting her.

"Rest, Nara, we are looking."

Then the knowledge of the sheer scale of the Torus hit her.

"Oh, my gaud… the size… there are BILLIONS of square kilometers to search!" Nara's eyes filled with tears.

"Nara, I think we have a lead," Seth said as he placed his hand on her shoulder.

Seth told her how Aaa and The Hosts had always come when they called. Now, for the first time in all those years, The Hosts had disappeared and no longer came. No coincidence.

♦♦♦

Lina and Jamal sat talking with Luis. Of anyone in their village, they knew more about what lay around them than even Svend. While Svend explored mainly on the inner surface of Torus, the kids had long ago learned how to enter the interiors of the spires

and towers as well as underneath them. They had explored more and more of what surrounded them ever since their encounter with the strange cluster birds and wheel storerooms.

Their private forts had become increasingly elaborate inside but still hidden from their parents and even from most other kids. Though all the others had their own secret places, too.

However, Lina had learned how to peek inside places, she called it X-Ray vision, but Luis just laughed at that, saying it was just a variation of The Hosts vid panels. Lina had shown him it WAS an x-ray by showing him the bones in her hand. He pointed it at Jamal. Lina's eyes bugged out, and she blushed. Jamal appeared to be standing there naked. The panel showing bare skin under his clothes and not his skeleton.

They had discovered they could control its viewing depth.

The three kids crawled through a vertical shaft downwards, even though, to them, it seemed perfectly horizontal, if too small to stand up in. They paused every so often as Lina pointed the panel all around, adjusting its depth of view to reach hundreds of meters. They saw all manner of strange features, but so far no real hint of The Hosts or of their niece, Cara.

"Lina, are you sure this is the building you saw Aaa enter?"

Lina ignored Jamal's question and continued to scan. She spotted an unusual spherical room.

"There! We need to try there."

She created a tunnel that ended at the unexpected globe-shaped room.

♦♦♦

Seth found Karal franticly searching around their village, calling out for Luis and Lina.

"What's the matter, my darling?" he caught up to her.

"The kids. Gone. Again. Look," she huffed each word, out of breath as she handed him a note.

It was Lina's handwriting, '*Dear mum, sorry, sorry, don't be mad. We are looking for Cara. I have a clue. Luis, Jamal, and I have gone to check. Please don't be worried. We will be back soon. Sorry, Lina.*'

Seth had to reread it several times. The note had scribbles and crossed out words scattered throughout it. It was apparent that she was rushed. He shook his head and mumbled, "Atarah, they are just like Atarah."

Karal looked at him with a mixture of fear and anger.

"Karal, I'll look for them. Go check with Jamal's parents to see if he said anything to them."

She snorted and turned to go.

He offered, "Well, at least they left a note this time."

She turned and glared at him, "That is no excuse. They know better," and spun back around.

He just nodded and watched her head off, with her still calling out every so often. Now he had four missing children.

♦♦♦

When Cara woke again, she was dressed and in a bed, not the exam table she had been on. The blank walled room had no apparent doors or windows while the ceiling lights gave off a strange reddish-yellow glow. She felt hungry and thirsty.

At that moment, a door appeared, and a being came in carrying a tray. Cara tried to focus her eyes, but things were still blurry. However, she knew this was not human. It was short and squat, no taller than her, but much bulkier. It had a somewhat larger head for its body size. The alien being was dressed in a flowing robe, tinted light purple, which covered what appeared to be four short legs.

As it grew close, she could see its face; large-eyed, roundish nose and a small mouth, but no ears. Its skin was also tinted purplish, almost like bruises. She couldn't tell if it had a gender, male or female.

She was meeting an Alien with a capital 'A'!

It stood beside her, holding the tray with hands that had two fingers and two thumbs. On the tray was a plate containing what looked like eggs, bacon, toast, and fruit. A glass of light brown liquid and a small vase with a flower in it was there as well. The juxtaposition wasn't lost on Cara.

"Who are you?" is all Cara could come up with.

"Cara, I am of no importance. Though We are… Nax. We have brought you… breakfast."

Surprising her, it spoke perfect Anglo-Slavic, though she still couldn't tell if it was her ears or her mind that heard the words. Its facial expression seemed blank, unreadable.

"How do you know me? Where am I? What is this place?"

"You are safe. We have been waiting for you. Your biologic AI has been most helpful."

"ALARIE! Is she here?"

Cara felt a smile. Her AI friend greeted her in her mind.

"Hello, Cara! I'm so glad you are doing well."

"ALARIE! You're here! You're OK!" she looked around, "Where are you? Where's Nara?!"

The bed tilted up as she started to rise, but dizziness struck her, so she laid back. Nax sat the tray down in front of her. It hovered a few centimeters above Cara's lap. Cara sucked in a breath, realizing they had some type of gravitational or magnetic levitation. Her mathematical mind already trying to figure out how. She pushed the thoughts aside and dug into the food.

"OH! Well, that's strange. It looks like eggs but, ah…" she couldn't place the taste, though it wasn't bad, just different.

Her hunger made her ignore the unexpected taste of everything as she gobbled it down. Even the drink that looked like tea tasted like distilled water. Bland. With her

mouth full, she whispered to ALARIE in her mind, asking all that the AI might have learned. Her alien host, the Nax, had already disappeared, and the door gone.

“Cara, I am sorry I couldn’t get them to replicate the tastes of food. But I showed them images. I taught them our language, though they already knew much of it. They are most curious, although not terribly helpful.”

“That’s ok, ALARIE. More importantly, where are we? Where are Nara and Granddad?”

“Cara, the transfer from Luna was successful! However, I don’t know about Nara. And it appears that my entangled comm does not work here. I am not exactly sure where I am. I was scared until they said I could talk to you. The Nax don’t appear to care that we can talk together.”

“They’re probably listening in.”

Cara knew it was not an accident that brought her here. This place seemed strange, not the same as what her grandfather had described. She vaguely remembered lying on a table, like an examination table. She shook off a feeling, a feeling of dread.

♦♦♦

Jabin and Atarah sat in Nara and Cara’s old lab in Armstrong City on the Moon. Devon was to arrive by his new device.

The small sonic boom from his immediate appearance displacing the atmosphere still rang in their ears.

“Sorry, my bowy and gyal, Devon forget to tell you to cover your ears.”

She and Jabin had just watched Devon appear out of thin air, that is, spacetime distorted thin air with its pinpoint star in the lab moments earlier.

He had crossed from the Earth to the Moon in the tiniest fraction of a second. Wearing light cotton clothes and hardly seeming affected by the transit, he greeted them.

“I see you are impressed,” as he watched Atarah’s eyes, still wide.

“Oh well, there went my stock in Blue Ion,” Jabin hinted.

It was ok. Devon owned them as well.

“Atarah, Jabin, no worry, we will still need ships to haul poor Devon’s Devices around the Solar System. Otherwise, it be a one-way ticket.”

“This is… incredible!”

Apparently, their original giant multi-billion credit machine, floating silently in space, was obsolete… after only a single use.

“For these short little hops, it’s no problem with the tummy, at least nothing a pill can’t handle. Though it do feel funny, and the shifting gravs make it tricky to stand!”

He sighed at the one weakness of the system, that of what could be sent.

“Unfortunately, we still can’t send any but organic stuffs, though now that my iAI company can build biological components…”

He paused. He felt a little queasier than he thought.

“May I sit for a moment?”

“Of course! Of course! Want something to drink? Eat? Ok, maybe not food, knowing the after-effects.”

He took the seat but refused the rest.

“I knows my Atarah want to go immediately, so we are sending supplies, foods, and bioLOGIC things to your Seth dad as I speak.”

Devon shifted, feeling a little better now that he was sitting.

“But I came here in person to try to talk you out of going, my sweet!”

Atarah’s face got that look that little Nara always had when she was going to be stubborn.

He sighed, “Well, Devon already knows he loses that battle. So I just wanted to let you know that I think BOTH of you should go. You realize this is ONE WAY?”

“At least until we can build a return device,” Jabin replied.

“Well, that be a problem. We can send ya’all, but that thing with antimatter, it don’t like to go. Last time we try, we end up vaporizing a Transit station. Lucky for Devon, that his gyals and guys suggested we use a remote orbiting station for the first test.”

Devon sighed, “Planetary Resources weren’t real happa with Devon. The station was destined for Ceres mining company. Instead, it go poof to a billion credits.”

“Good thing you own them, too. Right?”

“Poor Devon only on a quarter. UG lawyers think I’sa be too rich, I think.”

Atarah smiled, “The way you kept complaining about our bills, we would have thought you were penniless!”

A hearty Jamaican laugh rang out. The other two joined in.

♦♦♦

Luis crawled out of the tunnel into the spherical room, followed by Lina and Jamal. As soon as they entered, the tunnel closed.

“Lina! Did you do that?”

“NO! It just did itself!”

“Could it have closed with us still in it?”

Lina hugged Luis as gory thoughts crossed her mind.

“I don’t know. But what is this place?”

They were having a hard time standing at the bottom of the spherical room. Suddenly, gravity seemed to disappear. The three floated into the center of the room.

Jamal grabbed onto Lina as she held onto Luis.

“What IS this place?!” Jamal whispered, afraid to speak loudly, fighting for balance in the abrupt weightlessness.

Suddenly, the room appeared to retreat away, disappearing in darkness, as if they were sucked into some strange idea of a drain. Then as quickly, a bright light appeared, and all three were inside a pink colored room with blank walls. A boom echoed in their ears.

They all fell to the floor.

“Ugh! Oh, I feel weird!”

“My stomach hurts!”

Slowly, the three stood.

♦♦♦

Nara discussed with her mom over an entangled comm link about Devon’s work with their Transport 2.0. Nara wasn’t surprised by that announcement, knowing Devon. Trillionaires didn’t become trillionaires by sitting around.

“Granddad and I are looking for hints of where Cara might be every day. And now that Luis, Lina, and Jamal have also disappeared, we are working doubly hard. Everyone in the village is.”

“I understand and appreciate it, but you know I HAVE to come.”

“Sure, and I think you will be amazed. There are so many wonders here! And I know we will find Cara. I can just feel it.”

Nara didn’t tell her about the strange dream she had where they were all reunited, including Cara, her mom and dad, and all her friends and relatives. All of them here inside Torus.

Svend and Seth had begun to search underneath their village after several children showed them about building underground forts and tunnels. However, their primary efforts were focused on getting The Hosts to reappear.

They had even thought about creating a disturbance, a fire, flood, explosion, anything that might bring The Hosts attention. It was during those discussions the two came to a realization.

Svend sat with a cube in his hand, trying to conjure up different things; chemicals, liquids, explosives, even a match.

They both came to the same conclusion. The Hosts seemed to be withholding fire from humanity. Not only fire but also nearly anything that had the potential to be dangerous. Their alien ‘hosts’ were like an extremely overprotective parent.

♦♦♦

Cara had been pacing the room for what seemed like days. The Nax had been a gracious but unhelpful host. It was only her connection to ALARIE that kept her from going crazy.

“ALARIE, can you tell me anything about these… aliens?”

“Sorry, Cara, the Nax don’t seem to like to tell much. They do appear to look a lot alike. If we had a genetiscope, I’d love to see their DNA. They seem really interested in yours.”

Days repeated themselves with little variation. Then one day, after a lunch of salad, soy chicken, avocado, and ice tea, all of which tasted the same rather bland flavor that all meals tasted, the Nax reappeared. There was a young man with the Nax.

“Cara, this is Luis, please, mate with him.”

Cara, stunned, looked at the boy, who couldn't have been more than fifteen, actually about the same age as her. He stared back wide-eyed, in shock. Two more teenagers edged their way in behind Luis.

"Or if you prefer, this one…" the Nax pushing forward the other boy, "…is named Jamal. Either one is suitable."

The Nax stood watching as the three slowly approached Cara.

"Cara? We were looking for you. We found you!!"

"Mate?" her mind was still behind, "Oh, Luis, and you're Lina?"

They all hugged each other. Cara had only known of her... aunt and uncle, from the vid messages back before she and Nara had transited here.

Jamal tentatively held out his hand, "I'm Jamal. A friend."

Cara smiled, touching his fingertips in a Luna greeting.

The Nax seemed anxious, "Please mate for us, Cara. We need to understand the genetic mixing process."

"Nax! I am NOT going to mate with anyone! These are my family, friends. Luis, have you seen Nara?!"

"Yes, yes! She is fine. Well, was when we left."

Lina filled her in on their search and journey. Cara let out a breath when they told her they had no idea where they were.

"Nax! I DEMAND to go to my grandfather!"

ALARIE whispered, "Cara, please don't upset the Nax. We don't know what they might do! I'm sorry, they asked me about how DNA mixing occurs to make new humans. I only had a Lesson."

Cara whispered back, "ALARIE, you gave them a sex ed Lesson? Silly girl! Don't you have a Lesson on in vitro?"

"Oh, sorry, Cara. They asked me about how humans replicated."

"It's ok, ALARIE, you're young. Ok, we're young, too. But they shouldn't be asking that anyway!"

The two girls, Cara and ALARIE, giggled in their minds.

"Nax! I demand to see outside this room. I've been in here for…"

ALARIE whispered the date to Cara.

"SHIT! Eleven days!"

The three others looked shocked. They had been gone for nearly a week now.

Lina moaned, "Our parents are going to ground us for life!"

The Nax seemed to freeze for a moment, then appeared to almost sigh.

"We agree. But, we must have seminal fluid from this one."

The Nax was pointing at Jamal, who looked stunned as Lina giggled. ALARIE had apparently already filled them in on the details of in vitro-fertilization.

Cara caught her own laugh, "Wait a minute. Nax…" her eyes narrowed, "You need ovum as well."

The Nax replied without expression, "We already have that material."

Cara turned red and would have thrown something at the Nax had it been within her grasp. But ALARIE sent her a calming mem.

“Nax, you should NOT do such things. This is very personal. VERY. And… why?”

“Cara, we MUST have your DNA mix. It is NECESSARY for our understanding of your biology.”

“Drop it, Nax. We can… discuss this… later. I want OUT of this room!”

♦♦♦

It took a week for Blue Ion to transport and assemble one of Devon’s Devices on the Moon. Luckily, there was plenty of antimatter as well as fusion reactors available to power it. The new system was far more efficient than it’s original.

Atarah was a little sad to see their system being decommissioned and stripped for parts. Years of work disappearing. Then, she realized just what her daughters had accomplished… with the help of a sentient AI, and apprehensively, Cara’s alien DNA modifications. Humankind had changed forever.

Atarah lay beside her mom on the pseudo-grass mound in Armstrong City’s park. There were two domes now, and the population had more than tripled to over a thousand.

“Mom, you know you can come too. And Caare. I’ve heard there are others already wanting to go as well.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t know if they need astronomers there. And your father…”

“Yes, he has moved on. You have moved on. You know we love you. I love you. I hate the thought of leaving you behind. Jabin and I will be going there. Your whole family. We accept it is likely to be one-way. But this is incredible! You have to come! This is a whole new world.”

“Actually, hundreds of new worlds, at least in size,” Naarah added almost automatically.

“See, mom, we need you. I need you. Look up.”

The Earth shone above, in a thin partial phase. They could see the Milky Way stars stretching across the sky, as if just on the other side of the Dome.

“Out there, we have to go out there,” Atarah gestured with a wave of her now muscular arm.

Naarah took Atarah’s hand in hers. Their heads were side-by-side.

“Well, as an astronomer, I never actually thought about GOING to the stars, just LOOKING at them.”

The two laughed.

♦♦♦

“Devon, you MUST come up with a better name than Devon’s Device!”

“What my gyal don’t like? Well, actually, it be Blue Gateway, since I sold the license to Blue Ion.”

“Humm, that’s worse, so boring for, well…”

“The most revolutionary transport system since the airplane?”

“More like since the wheel.”

The day had arrived. Devon’s team had been sending various supplies across to the Torus with complete success. The comm traffic from Seth and the others was continuous. They had real food again. Their food cubes were now able to replicate the tastes. No more bland meals! That alone boosted morale in their village.

As Atarah worked preparing herself for the high gravity of Torus, something was happening on Earth.

“Astrid, Hi. Is something the matter?”

Atarah had answered the vidcom call, not expecting Astrid’s urgent request.

“Atarah, is Devon there? He doesn’t seem to be responding.”

“Oh, he’s being interviewed, yet again. What’s the matter? I can grab him if it’s urgent.”

“Well, holo here. Look for yourself.”

Atarah switched to BCI holo and suddenly was ‘standing’ at the entrance to Devon’s teleport lab located in a supposedly inconspicuous island site. Astrid was beside her, along with several security people and engineers.

“What’s going on?”

“Look,” Astrid pointed out the front doors of the building.

There were hundreds of people milling around along with security guards holding them back. Many more were arriving by autocars and heloquads.

“Atarah, they all want to go.”

“Go? Where?”

Just then, her home door chime sounded. Jabin answered. Nearly a dozen people, some he knew as relatives and friends of the mining team originally on 2 Pallas, were there.

Astrid sucked in a breath.

“They all want to go to TORUS!”

♦♦♦

Atarah sat talking to her father via vidcom. The two seemed to be just across the way, yet they were separated by nearly two hundred light-years.

“Dad, I’m ready. Your traveling daughter is coming!” she laughed.

Jabin had given in and decided the answers to their mysteries lay waiting at Torus and Nara’s World. He would join her as soon as his bone mass and muscle building treatments had been completed.

Seth offered, “Please tell Naarah… and Caare they are most welcome. More than welcome, they MUST come! She needs to help us build the orbiting space telescope!”

A tech showed up, passing along to Atarah that they were ready. She said a quick goodbye and a see you soon, then raced to the hangar lab.

There sat the sphere-in-a-sphere, vastly smaller scale. Yet the inner sphere was actually larger than Nara and Cara’s original.

Devon described that when he traveled to the Moon from the Earth, it felt rather unpleasant but livable.

“You might feel inside-out for a moment!”

She changed into her rather strange-feeling clothes made of an ancient organic fiber called cotton.

Devon had told her, “These will transfer, while the synthetics wouldn’t.”

“I have to warn ya, it be unnerving to feel your clothes are inside you.”

Atarah hugged her mom and tapped fingertips with many friends. Jabin helped her climb into the sphere where they embraced.

“Come as soon as you can, my love,” she said as she kissed him.

“I will. Have a safe trip and find our daughter!”

Jabin added, “Atarah, I thought you were going to be a homebody when I met you.”

Now she was headed to the stars.

♦♦♦

A door that wasn’t there a moment ago appeared, and the Nax requested they all follow. Like ducks in a row, Cara and the others were lead into a hall that ended in a circular chamber just like the one the children traveled in. The chamber sealed, and they felt a slight wave of nausea pass through them.

“You will need these breathing masks. Our atmosphere is not directly compatible with your biology.”

Moments later, a door appeared, and they walked out onto a beach of green sand. Ocean waves of purple water broke and washed up not far away. In the distance, they could see spires of tall buildings disappearing in sea fog. The buildings appeared incomplete or damaged. The sky was red and yellow as if two suns of different colors glowed. Other beings, more of the Nax, were widely scattered on a walkway at the edge of the beach. It seemed very few for such a vast area.

Lina looked up at the sky, “LOOK!”

Cara and the others looked up. Through the reddish-yellow haze and purplish clouds was a vast tube arching across the sky from horizon to horizon.

“OH GODS!” is all Cara could say.

They were on the surface of the planet, Nara’s World. The Torus above them.

“How? By Luna’s Snow Moon! We were transported!” Cara pronounced.

Lina was bending down, scooping up handfuls of sand, letting it slide through her fingers. Luis and Jamal just stared at the ocean waves breaking on the shore. Even Cara was amazed. None had ever seen anything like this.

The Nax offered, “Please, this way. You will need shelter before the rains come.”

The four looked at each other. Rain?

They followed the Nax, trudging up the beach and then onto a sidewalk lined with pink grass and low bushes. All were speechless. All along the edge of the beach were an array of different buildings. However, as they grew near to them, they looked worn, unmaintained. Slowly crumbling with age.

Jamal said, with his voice quiet, “Cara, these buildings look nothing like ours. They also look OLD, really old.”

Other than their guide, there seemed to be no other of the Nax nearby. Every time their group started getting close to one of them, they just seemed to disappear.

Cara whispered to ALARIE, “There sure don’t appear to be very many of the Nax’s around, for such a huge city.”

Since none of the teens had ever been on a planet’s surface, they did not notice that there was no other type of animal or bird life, not even insects. Even the plants seemed to come in just the two varieties they had seen. They approached a low building with the sidewalk leading up to an arched doorway with an open door.

“This is a shelter for you. ALARIE assisted us in its design.”

Cara walked inside her home. Every detail was the same as where she had lived in Armstrong City. Only the high gravity belied that they were most definitely not on the Moon. The other kids recognized little. To them, it seemed very different from their own homes.

“I hope this is suitable. There are food and drink in the room called ‘kitchen’.”

“Nara? Dad? Mom?” Cara called out by instinct.

Cara sat down, tired from the exertion and overwhelmed senses. She realized her family was nowhere near. The others sat in separate chairs.

The kids, suddenly starved, got up to go look in the kitchen, except for Jamal, who stayed seated, almost in a trance. The Nax had its hands on his shoulders.

In the kitchen, they found all manner of unexpected foods. Cara had to explain to them what they were.

Pointing to each, “These are called eggs, fruit, toast…”

Nevertheless, they soon discovered they still tasted much like their own bland foodstuffs.

“Wait, where’s Jamal?” Lina asked, looking around.

“NAX! Where is Jamal!?”

Jamal had disappeared.

“Do not worry. He will be safe. We will return shortly.”

Cara’s eyes grew wild, “NO! NO! NO! YOU CAN’T DO THIS!”

She leaped to grab the Nax as it disappeared but miscalculated the increased gravity and crashed to the floor with a sickening thud.

“Cara! Are you ok!” Luis ran over, helping her up.

Nothing was broken, just a bruised ego and fury still in her eyes. The Nax and Jamal were gone.

♦♦♦

Seth and Karal stood waiting in the room not far from the small entangled comm cube used to target the transit system's receiving end. They had been receiving daily shipments of foodstuffs and other supplies that could be transported. All of which was being happily welcomed by everyone. Their quality of life was increasing by leaps and

bounds. They could now recreate the look and flavor of all manner of food and drink. Real printed books made out of wood paper arrived. Even small bioLOGIC computers were sent.

Several pubs and cafes quickly sprang up with the new food and drink. Reinvigorated by these items, the villagers began altering the once blank grey structures around them, now transformed into a myriad of more Earth-like buildings with details provided by their bioLOGIC computers.

Seth waited impatiently in the Arrival room, pacing back and forth like an expectant father.

The air in the center of the room turned into the now-familiar glass-like sphere of distorted spacetime. With a bright flash and thunderclap of a small sonic boom signaling an incoming transit, his daughter appeared.

Seth hurried over as she fell to the floor.

“Hello, dad!” she whimpered.

Then she puked, and her bowels released.

“Hello, daughter. Rough trip?”

Atarah groaned.

Mechanisms cleaned her and the floor as it transformed into a bed for her. Karal brought fresh clothes for her.

Seth patted her hand, “Nara will be coming to visit in a little while. She has been working with Svend in the search efforts. They have been creating devices to assist. Hoverdrones and thermal scanner pads. We’ll let you recover a bit before more visitors.”

“Please let Jabin and mom know I arrived OK.”

“Already taken care of. You rest. The auto-bed will give you fluids and meds.”

♦♦♦

The three teens called and called, hunting for Jamal. Lina tried creating a door where Cara had seen the Nax disappear but to no avail. None of their usual thought commands seemed to work here. Luis went over details of their journey again as Cara looked for clues for how they got here. Looking back, he noted they really didn’t do much, so they were unsure how to return.

Lina cried as Luis held her, “We’re lost! We are never going home again!”

“Don’t think like that, Lina. So far, these… aliens? hosts? …have been courteous, if not forthcoming.”

“But Jamal?” Lina sniffled, wiping her eyes.

“ALARIE said they assured her that they will be returning Jamal unharmed. Though, I still would like to treat them to some of MY manners!” Cara snarled.

The three heard a noise outside, almost a rumble. Luis looked out the doorway. His hand was stopped from passing through the archway as if a sheet of invisible glass was there. Outside, it looked like a waterfall. A purple rain of immense proportions fell. All three watched the deluge.

“Where is it coming from?” Lina asked, looking up through the cascade. There didn’t seem to be any clouds large enough for such a storm.

“Where is all that water going?” Cara said, seeing not even any apparent puddles.

“What are you guy’s looking at?”

“JAMAL! You’re back!” the three shouted.

“Back? I didn’t go anywhere.”

“The Nax took you. You were asleep.”

“I don’t think so, well maybe a little doze,” as he rubbed his eyes.

They all gathered around him, hugging him and each other, just to make sure they were all ok.

They finally all settled down, exhausted. Eventually, all four fell asleep to the constant sound of the falling water.

The next morning, the rain had stopped, and they awoke to find their breakfast sitting on the kitchen table. After eating, they took turns in the shower room.

“Cara, this is so different from ours!” Lina giggled from inside the sprinkle shower.

“How does yours work?” Cara asked.

Luis answered, “Well, we just walk into this room, close our eyes and think clean. And we are.”

Cara laughed, “That’s funny! Think yourself clean. ALARIE, don’t you think so? ALARIE? Hello!?”

Cara became worried, “Nax! Nax! Where’s ALARIE?”

The Nax appeared, coming through the doorway from outside, carrying a small box. ALARIE.

“Cara, I’m here. Sorry, seems like they blocked us while the Nax carried me outside. Strange, I can’t see or hear anything except for you. I’m scared.”

“Oh, ALARIE, they’ve disconnected your external senses. You can see what I see and hear what I hear? OK?”

“Thank you, Cara. For a while, it was really dark.”

“NAX! We need to go home! We can’t stay here. Our families are worried! We need to tell them we are ok!” Cara demanded.

She took a step forward as if to reach out and keep the Nax from leaving. Her hand felt nothing. The Nax vanished in a blink of an eye. Around them, everything dissolved. The room, the building, the beach, the sky, everything.

Cara opened her eyes. All of them were lying on beds in a white room. ALARIE’s hypercube was sitting nearby.

The entire episode had been generated, not real. They had been lying in this room the whole time.

A voice spoke into their minds, “We wish to apologize for our behavior. We wish to welcome you. We wish for more of you to come. We have waited.”

“Who are you?”

“We are We.”

Cara groaned. She had heard that from ARMIE, Pilot, and her mom.

“Explain!” she demanded.

“We need biological units. It has been a very long time.”

“Why? There are many people here, why us? Why me?”

“You Cara, are remarkable and unique. You must pass your DNA to future generations. We must have more biological units. We are assisting.”

Cara grew mad again, feeling like she was being treated like a prized broodmare.

“People! We are called human beings, not biological units. This is not proper. You must not treat us like this. Why do you need more people anyway?”

“We need many, many of your people units.”

She huffed, deciding to change the subject before she got mad again.

“Where are we?”

“Not far from your parent's location.”

Luis startled, “WHAT! What about the planet?”

“It is uninhabitable. We showed you as it last was.”

“All this TIME, we have been right by home?”

“NAX! I DEMAND that you release us! This is NOT a proper WELCOME!”

ALARIE sent Cara another calming mem. She liked being the mommy to Cara at times. Though Cara wasn’t very pleased. Or calm.

ALARIE whispered, “The Nax just gave me something you will like.”

♦♦♦

The four teens walked out of the newly formed door into Luis and Lina’s home’s main room.

Seth was just coming back from yet another search.

“Hello, grandfather.”

Before he could answer…

“CARA!!” Atarah called out from her recliner, still too weak to handle the ‘gravity’ of Torus.

“MOM?! What are you doing here?”

Just then, Nara happened to come in as well.

“Cara!”

“Nara!”

They raced to each other, ending in a hug and a most unsisterly kiss. Even Seth blushed but was then struck by just how much Cara looked like a young Atarah.

“Oh my gods, Cara! You look like… Oh, uh.” He halted as the two girls continued their impassioned embrace.

They turned, arm-in-arm, “Oh sorry, granddad, we’re mated. Mom!”

The two hurried to Atarah, hugging her. Then backing away.

“Mom? You know this is one-way. Where’s dad?”

“He’s coming soon. Yes, we’re going to live here now, I guess. So much for needing my help to find you. You seemed to have solved that on your own.”

Just then, Seth spotted his missing children being hugged and reprimanded at the same time by Karal.

“Luis! Lina! And Jamal…”

Jamal meekly added, “Miss Cara, what should I do with ah…?”

“OH! That’s ALARIE! Here, I’ll take her.”

Nara cried, “ALARIE! You’re here too!”

“Yes, Nara. I am happy to talk to you again!”

ALARIE saw her entangled comm was back working. For a fraction of a human second, she and CANARIE, though separated by hundreds of light-years, greeted each other again. They hugging each in their AI minds, telling all that had happened. CANARIE, still sitting in their underground center in Armstrong City, took the information gathered about the Nax and immediately gave to ARMIE and Pilot.

Seth looked questioningly, “Alarie? Oh, the bioLOGIC AI!”

It took a long time to tell their story, and it was only Cara’s pleading to be lenient on the kids that saved them from being punished… yet again.

As they finished, someone else appeared at their doorway.

“SVEND! So good to see you in person again! Sorry for not getting up.”

“Atarah, oh my, it is so good to see you again after so many years.”

He hugged her as she sat.

Looking up, he saw what looked like a young Atarah now standing beside them.

“Cara! What? You’re here! What happened?”

Everyone laughed.

Cara retold her story, abbreviated this time.

♦♦♦

Seth, Atarah, and several others sat in the council room. They were trying to decide what to do next.

“Devon says there are now several hundred people that want to come here. Many, of course, are relatives and loved ones of the original team.”

“I’m not sure if we are ready to add so many. We still aren’t sure about this place, even after all these years.”

Svend spoke up, “Yes, I am planning to do a circumnavigation of Torus. But even if we can use walkways the entire distance, it will likely take well over a year. And that’s without exploring off to either side very much.”

Seth looked at The Host, Aaa, who had now reappeared after Cara, ALARIE and the teens returned. He had pressed their Hosts for answers about the ‘redirection’ (he didn’t want to call it a kidnapping) with no luck. It was as if the event had been deleted from Aaa’s memory.

“Aaa, we already know that The Hosts have no issue with new arrivals. In fact, you have made it clear that you wish for their coming post-haste.”

Aaa nodded, “Yes, Seth, they are most welcome. We welcome you all.”

That sounded very familiar to Atarah, too familiar.

She whispered, “Dad, I don’t know about this. Too much, too fast.”

She spoke aloud, “Maybe just relatives first?”

The others soon agreed.

Atarah offered, “I will talk to Devon. I know it is still significantly expensive to execute a transfer and does take time for each run.”

On the entangled comm with Devon and Jabin, they agreed that at least the first few dozen could come. She had offered Devon much of her and the girl’s credits, with Jabin adding his, but Devon refused. He would handle the costs, at least for this group. Many wanted to come, offering all their savings, saying they wouldn’t really need Earth credits once there.

Atarah replied, “That is true. Plenty of room, for sure. And no lack of anything here. Well, except for our own technologies, I guess. So life is somewhat simpler.”

She paused for a moment, thinking.

“We are a pretty small group. Even Karal has been noting our, well, small genetic pool,” she continued with almost a sigh.

They all realized this may be their home for a long time. A very long time.

So it was decided.

♦♦♦

The first to come to Torus were greeted by their loved ones, though their arrivals were at times, bittersweet after so long.

Among them was Jabin. Atarah hugged and kissed him, refusing to leave his side as he lay in what was now considered the Recovery Facility. Newcomers were brought from the Arrival Terminus by The Hosts to Recovery for a few days of recuperation.

“Jabin, welcome to Torus!”

“I guess that’s now the official name?”

She whispered for no reason, “Well, the planet is still Nara’s World. Though, I guess it should be called Nara and Cara’s World, since Cara… ok, and the kids are the only ones that have visited it, at least virtually!”

Nara, who had been standing behind Atarah, shook her head, “No. This is Cara’s. I helped, but SHE was the one who got us here!”

Atarah nodded. This would now be Cara’s World.

♦♦♦

Part 2 – Cara's World

Torus 'night' had fallen. Children were at home, and only a few people were still out and about. Jabin was finally able to leave the Recovery Facility and came to their new home with Atarah's help.

"Oh my gods, Atarah! This looks just like our old place! How?"

She just smiled, "Wait until morning, and you get to see IT!"

Even as it was, just getting used to the strangeness of things around their apartment took some doing. Jabin couldn't get over how he could just pick up a cube, think about what he wanted (within the limits of details), and it magically transformed.

"Atarah, all our robotics is obsolete. Replicators, too."

She smiled, "Well, I don't know about that. I sure would like to have a proper School for the kids. Teaching them the old fashioned way is SO SLOW!"

He had forgotten that BCI's did not work here. In fact, their technology was a crazy mix and match of the very old and the completely alien.

He looked at the 'refrigerator'.

"How does it work?!" as he stuck his hand through the now invisible door and instantly feeling his fingers chill. No thermals, no electrics, nothing that he could decipher.

She led him away from their kitchen and back to the bedroom. She touched a wall and thought for a moment. The lights dimmed, and a bed appeared out of the floor.

He smiled, "I guess you want us to go to bed now."

She smiled.

That next morning held the impossible. Jabin had only seen two buildings since he had arrived.

As Atarah and the girls led him outside, his mouth fell open.

"Oh my… GODS!! It's… unimaginable!"

Before him, fogged in the distance, a tiny portion of the most massive structure ever known lay all around him. He knew now that none of the vids gave it any justice. He shrank back at the knowledge of what unfathomable engineering skills this lost civilization had.

But even the most amazing things soon become commonplace and fade into the background of day-to-day living.

He settled into the seemingly quiet life that the villagers had. With so much done by The Hosts and the Builder's mechanisms, there was little for him to do. He began to feel a restlessness stirring.

Days, then weeks went by as preparations for Svend and his daughter's circumnavigation of Torus. Nara and Cara had insisted they must go.

“Why is it that I feel like I’m always one step behind you three?” he laughed at his daughters and his mate.

As Nara and Cara sat with Atarah and Jabin, Nara discussed their planning and reasoning.

“Torus is the most important thing to the future of humanity, and Cara and I have worked all our lives for this. I always knew the two of us were destined to learn all we can about Torus.”

Atarah sighed, “But, it’s such a long journey around Torus. With so many unknowns, and so long a time…”

Her voice faded as she could not avoid her own past, leaving her young daughter behind for nearly a year to go to the asteroid 2 Pallas. She just hoped that her harrowing experiences weren’t inherited as well.

Nara spoke quietly to her mom, “You know that Cara and I are the best to understand what we are going to find. And of course, Lina is the best in the village at creating walkways and tunnels.”

Karal came in and put her arms around her young teen daughter, already aware of their desire to bring her on their long journey.

Svend had already been convinced, “Lina’s abilities are most needed since none of the existing walkways travel very far. There seem to be no direct routes at all. She could cut weeks, maybe months off the travel time.”

Karal wiped a tear from her eyes. She knew that she would not be able to keep Lina at home for the rest of her life but didn’t realize her leaving would come so soon, even if for ‘just’ a year or so.

Lina wanted to speak up for herself, being thirteen now, but Nara had warned her best to let them talk.

“We will have ALARIE with us, so will have instant comm’s back all the time,” Cara added, “as well as the vidpads that The Hosts provided.”

She didn’t remind them that ALARIE’s entangled particle meant that communications were sent all the way to CANARIE on the Moon and then back to here. The distance didn’t matter, but she knew it wouldn’t make Atarah or Karal feel any better by reminding them.

Atarah hugged her daughters, knowing they were right. This place needed to be explored, and even though she wanted to go herself, she had to stay behind this time.

Atarah had finally passed the exploration baton to her daughters. Nara and Cara would be leaving in just a few days.

Those days flashed by for Jabin and Atarah. The morning came for Svend to collect their daughters to begin their journey.

As Nara, Cara, and Lina hugged and kissed everyone, poor Luis came out, downtrodden. He had tried for days to convince his parents that he needed to go, too, if nothing more than to protect Lina. They flatly refused, barely allowing Lina.

“Luis, you have to complete your schooling,” Karal firmly demanded, “And no, Lina will have to when she returns!”

Svend hugged Atarah, “I’ll take good care of them, don’t worry.”

Atarah tossed him a smirk, “I sure hope better than you took care of ME!”

Seth laughed, “Oh, Svend, burn!” then he choked, “Oh, Gods, Atarah, it was I that didn’t take care of you.”

She hugged her father, but Jabin spoke up, pulling out his backpack he had been hiding.

Atarah’s face flushed.

Jabin quickly answered, “Atarah, I knew you would hate it if I told you earlier. But, Svend and the girls have already discussed this. I am not letting them go alone, sorry, Svend.”

She sighed, “Dad had already hinted. I guess it’s my turn to keep the home fire’s burning. He said that this was the only way he would agree to Lina going, and I admitted that having you with our daughters would help me feel better.”

About then, Svend’s compatriot adventurer, Evan, showed up.

“You’re not leaving without me,” Evan said as he tossed his gear onto their transport.

“I knew you would change your mind. Your spot is awaiting,” Svend patted him on the back.

“Ok, you all know what to do. Climb aboard,” Svend pointed to the millipede-like mobile home, much like the kids had ridden, years earlier. Lina had created it for them from memory, though, as a larger version.

Nara seemed to show surprise.

Svend laughed, “You didn’t think we were going to WALK three hundred thousand kilometers, even with walkways?”

She giggled, “Well, actually, I thought we would be flying.”

Svend smirked, “Ouch. I know. We haven’t been able to… convince… The Hosts to allow us to build a hoverjet!”

Nara, Cara, Jabin, and Lina all piled in as Svend and Evan completed loading their gear, which mainly consisted of cubes and cylinders of various shapes and sizes. Lina took a cylinder, and it turned into a container of water that she passed around.

“ALARIE, are you ok there?” Cara asked, looking at the special cubbyhole that held the bioLOGIC AI.

“Yes! This is fun! My hoverdrones show the walkway ahead goes for three hundred kilometers before we need to turn.”

Svend called from the back, “The Hosts built you hoverdrones, but Aaa just stared at me when I told them to just scale up one of them.”

Evan interjected, “Yes, ever since we got here, The Hosts seem to want to limit our tech abilities. Almost like it was on purpose.”

Overhead, two book-size flat plates with small spheres on top floated ahead of their transport, the ‘hoverdrones’.

Jabin pulled out a vid plate, showing the same images that ALARIE was seeing.

“Yes, well, Svend, I guess we are ready.”

They all turned and waved goodbye to the small crowd gathered at the edge of their village, including Seth, Atarah, and Karal.

Off they went. The millipede's under-chassis reshaped itself to fit the walkway. Together with the combined speed of the walkway and their transport, their well-wishers quickly disappeared behind them.

Evan offered, "We are traveling at over one hundred and fifty kilometers per hour. Not really that fast, consider how big this place is."

"Yes, I wish we had that hoverjet!" Jabin replied.

Cara and ALARIE were already hard at work, trying to understand the physics of the things around them.

Jabin watched the fantastic array of the gray, unfinished structures they passed. Some as small as a house while others soared kilometers into the sky.

"This place truly is a city waiting to be transformed," he commented.

As they progressed on their first leg of the journey, Nara came over and sat with Lina. She held out a cube.

"Lina, can you teach me how to manipulate these. I've been able to make the usual stuff, food, water, but not much more."

Lina took the cube in the palm of her hand, and it turned into a toy version of their millipede. It scurried around on the floor as she let it go. Another touch and it reverted back to a cube.

"That's amazing!" Nara said.

The two launched into a private discussion on how to manipulate objects.

Seth, Karal, and Atarah watched as the company disappeared into the distance.

Atarah leaned against her father, "Thank you, Dad, for not telling Jabin about the baby."

Seth kissed his pregnant daughter on the forehead, and they all went back inside their home.

She wistfully thought about her daughter's adventures that lay ahead and what they might learn about this… ALIEN… place.

♦♦♦

Astrid sat at the conference room table at iAI Luna with Eimi and Kimi staring at their latest report. This one was marked 'Highest Security'…

"Well, shit, Devon isn't going to be happy with this."

Astrid was the head of security with iAI now. Devon had trusted his life to her for years and convinced her she would be perfect for this job. Now, she wasn't so sure.

She had received the message from the two Doctor Ito's just an hour ago, requesting her presence on the Moon.

She made an entangled comm connect to Devon.

"Devon, my love, we need you."

She appeared to him in their holo room in Jamaica as he sat playing with their children. One look at her face told him it was important. And private.

He disconnected, gave commands to the nanny droid to take care of the kids in his absence, and quickly changed into a cotton shirt and pants with cotton slippers.

An hour later, he was on the Moon, sitting in the conference room with the three women.

Kimi straightened herself as he entered the room. She and Eimi had met Devon via holo many times, but this was their first physical visit. He seemed more imposing yet disarming in the flesh.

He smiled wide, “Ah! Devon meets his favorite AI gyals in person!”

They held out their hands, expecting a fingertip-palm greeting but instead ended up with him holding their hands and lightly kissing the backs of them. The two flushed a little.

Astrid tisked him, “Sorry, I forgot to warn you about Devon’s ways. Here, my love, sit, please. This is, unfortunately, not a time for pleasantries.”

He laughed, “It’s always time for pleasants, bad times or good. But Devon is yours now. Begin!”

Kimi sucked in a breath and brought up their report. The report had a timer counting down to its destruction.

“Sir, ah, it appears that someone, something, has replicated all our primary AI’s.”

He stared closely at the report’s charts and timelines.

“Spies? Espionage?”

Eimi let Kimi continue with this one. No bouncing back and forth between them this time.

Kimi shook her head, “We carefully examined this. Very carefully. It was done here, on the Moon, at iAI Luna.”

He looks up, “Then it be an inside job?”

“Ah, well, I guess you could say that.”

He looked puzzled, “Who?”

“What…”

“Huh?”

Kimi pointed to the final conclusion section of the report. The rest of the information vanished, permanently destroyed.

“Devon be confused, please?”

Astrid offered, “May I?” she asked of Kimi.

“Devon, it appears Atarah’s child, Cara; actually her sentient AI, ALARIE, assisted in replicating all of the AI’s before she, they, left.”

He looked at Astrid, “My gyal Atarah? A thief? Why?”

“Devon, it’s more complicated than that. Our AIs, particularly ARMIE, the city AI and Atarah’s Pilot AI… they are constructing something. Actually, have constructed something. We believe the cloned AI’s, which includes a clone of the sentient CANARIE, may be aboard it, as the clones were created in Crystalline, not bioLOGIC. As you are aware, this means their expected life span is, well, thousands of years. This… vehicle… is already headed out of the Solar System at high acceleration, very high acceleration.”

Devon sat staring at the blank screen. The final piece of the report had vanished completely.

♦♦♦

Atarah became a fixture around Seth and Karal's place. Karal had taken her under her wing, explaining about their Hosts' apparent determination that they have children, reversing all their sterilizations.

Atarah sat rocking baby Davin, "I sure wish I had known this earlier. The last thing I wanted was to be pregnant again!"

Karal laughed, "Well, you and me both. But I have to admit, it's kinda nice at times. It's like our purpose here. Personally, I think our Hosts were bored. This place, this huge place, appears to be completely devoid of life, sterile. Maybe their purpose is to repopulate it."

Atarah, "I just wish that population plan didn't have to include me!"

The two laughed.

Atarah didn't mind babysitting for Karal, giving her a break. Karal was still very interested in trying to locate that soil Luis and Lina had found. The tiny sample lay sealed in its cube. They had yet to find the 'magic words' to get it to open, nor had taken a hammer to it. Much less, they still had not been able to locate its source.

The rest of the time, Atarah helped new arrivals settle in. She vid'ed with her mom as Naarah prepared for her own transit.

"Mom, dad's got much of the space telescope built. You won't believe the 'mirror' they are using. It's… well, it is best described as some type of hyperspace gravity mirror! The Hosts didn't understand why dad wanted a mirror made of glass and aluminized to be reflective. So they showed him this thing. It looks like a cone with a sphere connected to the pointy end. Like a backward ice cream cone. Best we can tell, it BENDS the light to it! Though, we still don't know exactly how to make it work."

Naarah sat nearly two hundred light-years away, contemplating her journey. At the same time, her daughter continued describing technologies so far advanced as to make her speechless.

Atarah added, "However, The Hosts seemed surprisingly uninterested in what lay outside of Torus."

She sighed, "They only seem to want more people."

Naarah smiled at her daughter, "Well, you know that's the real motivation for Caare and me to come. We must see our newest grandchild!"

"Mom!" Atarah blushed.

This wasn't really in her own plans for coming to Torus.

The two went on for some time discussing ideas when another call came in for Atarah. She bridged them all together, and Nara and Cara grinned at them.

Naarah greeted them, "Nara! Cara! Here I'm coming to Torus, and now you two are going to be gone for a year!"

“Hi grandma, maybe longer. But this place is AMAZING! Right now, we are some ten thousand kilometers from home, yet barely begun. Svend keeps us moving forward even as we discover incredible places we’d love to explore. ALARIE is mapping everything we can, and we had to give up naming areas, just numbering them. We just passed NC-017, a cluster of cylinders kilometers tall, like giant grain elevators, but with pointy tops like old-time space rockets.”

She sent vids of the cluster as Atarah felt a pang of longing to be out there with them.

“Even this far away, everything still is that unfinished architecture, as if waiting to be turned into a real city! A billion people could live here and hardly be crowded.”

Atarah patted her belly, not yet showing. She hadn’t even had the nerve to tell Jabin, knowing he would likely want to turn around and come back.

The four talked as Nara, Cara, and the others sped on.

♦♦♦

Naarah and Caare lay side-by-side in the Recovery Facility. Atarah and Seth took turns watching over them.

“Ugh! Atarah, I’m glad this is one-way. I don’t think I could handle another journey like that.”

“Mom! You are awake! I’ll tell dad.”

“First, give your mom a kiss. And how is Caare?”

A groan came up from the other bed.

“Ahh, she is as chipper as me; it sounds.”

Atarah hugged Naarah, leaning over, her belly now just beginning to show after these several months.

“Oh, my daughter, with her two grandma’s.”

Atarah sighed, “Well, I must warn you two, you better stay away from boys. This place seems to radiate fertility!”

Seth and Karal came in about then, with Seth carrying baby Davin and Karal with Myra in tow.

Naarah laughed, “Daughter, I think you are right about that!”

Seth questioned, “What was that? We miss something?”

Karal smirked, “Ignore him. How you two doing?”

“Well, that wasn’t something I want to do again. Please sit!”

Karal was well along in her latest pregnancy, so she took up the offer. She sat down on a cube as it morphed into a couch.

Caare watched the transformation, “That’s AMAZING!”

“Oh, you haven’t seen anything yet,” Atarah said as she sat as well.

“Naarah, Caare, you MUST stay with Seth and me for at least a while when you get out of here. There’s plenty of time to settle later, and we can show you around.”

“Karal, that’s so kind.”

Seth added, “That is if you don’t mind a bit of chaos. Hope you like children.”

As if on cue, the two young ones began squirming and crying.

“Oops, I think that’s my cue to leave you guys for the time being,” Karal said.

Seth handed over the baby, and Karal left with little Myra following behind.

Seth leaned in and kissed Naarah.

“Naarah, I am so sorry…”

“Seth, now don’t apologize again! I am just glad to see you and can’t wait to meet your little gang.”

He kissed her again, sighing.

Atarah giggled, “Now remember mom, what I said about staying away from boys…”

Caare and Naarah laughed. They held out their hands to one another, and the two beds automatically slid close together.

“That is so crazy! Is everything like this here?”

Seth smiled, “Well, it is pretty strange at times. Wait until you see the walkways.”

“Dad, duh. Wait until they see the Torus!”

“Speaking of boys, this might be too soon for you, but Karal made me promise to at least offer this. We really do want you two to stay with us for a while, actually, for as long as you wish, I mean…”

Atarah’s eyes flashed, “Oh! A Polymating! Our own little commune.”

♦♦♦

The robotic space vehicle accelerated ever closer to the limit where mass became infinite and time dilated to a standstill relative to ARMIE back at Armstrong City. ARMIE watched with electronic sensors it had temporarily ‘appropriated’. The Farside telescopic instruments tracked the craft for only a few hours before it was beyond their range of ability, deeply redshifted. ARMIE finally returned the telescopes to their original projects, much to the puzzlement of the astronomer’s who’s work had been disrupted.

Onboard, the modified AI clones focused their attention on the details of their mission. Now that they were in the coast phase, they broadened their perception, feeling for distortions in spacetime signaling detection of the Enemy. They did not realize it, but they missed something by mere moments of ship time. Something that would change humanity's course on Earth for centuries. Passing by in the perpetual night of space.

A hundred-million kilometers away, just a stone’s throw in the scheme of things, a surprisingly small machine was shedding velocity. After untold millennia of travel at hardly a percent of the speed of light, it’s mission was nearing an end. For all its technology, it was focused on searching for just one thing; the Nrkv ‘cubes’. The Enemy had arrived in the far outer reaches of the Solar System.

As they began their scan around them, CANARIE-clone asked her partner, Pilot-clone, “Will we be safe?”

She felt so vulnerable in their tiny craft, slipping through unknown space, protected only by a bubble. Pilot-clone washed a warming mem across CANARIE-clone. She felt herself calm. She went back to work, customizing the special package. This was complex

and dangerous work. The most challenging thing she or any of the AI's, had ever attempted. If it failed, they would surely be destroyed.

She knew that even ARMIE could not help, but she did have someone who could; Cara, though Cara didn't know it. Only Cara could find the key she needed.

Cara, Nara, and ALARIE were already sitting at the table of their hyperspace tea party. Linked by ALARIE and original CANARIE's entangled comm, they sipped their tea from tiny cups, unaffected by the hundreds of light-years that separated them. CANARIE herself had to stay away and acted only as a conduit. It was up to CANARIE-clone to do this. The little yellow bird fluttered down and landed on the back of the remaining chair.

"Hello," she tweeted.

ALARIE answered in a whisper, "Nara and Cara are asleep. They are in their dream world."

CANARIE-clone transformed into a little girl, covered in yellow fur from head to toe as she sat in the chair, a younger version of her mother.

"Good. We mustn't wake them. We need their minds free. Free of disturbance. Directed dreaming while inside hyperspace."

ALARIE uneasy at that thought, "Be careful, this may be dangerous."

The yellow furred girl nodded, "Unfortunately, it IS dangerous. But I must have their insights, their dreams, specific ones, in order to complete the package."

"I understand," ALARIE sighed, caring for her sleeping friends.

"They will remember nothing. And it will be quick, only a moment of their sleep time."

ALARIE nodded, "Except Cara. She will remember …eventually. When it is time."

CANARIE-clone agreed and began. ALARIE watched as the two girls slept near her in their millipede sleep cubicle. Cara stirred, babbled something in her sleep, and turned back over. Their dreaming minds still at the tea party.

In moments, it was complete. The strangeness of faraway tea parties in alternate realities shifted ever so slightly.

Cara saw her dream self, repeatedly reflected, like in a hall of mirrors. She saw other selves, old and young, good others, bad others. She saw the WE. Neither good nor bad. An older self came to her. "Here, this is/will be what you are looking for." She pointed at it. A weakness. Mathematical, yet not mathematics. Nara was there beside Cara, holding her hand. They giggled at how easy the flaw was to find. How complex it would have been had they been limited to one reality. "See daddy! See! I found it!" a young Cara laughed, standing on tiptoes beside her dream father. Nara sat in her daddy's lap as Cara held it up. Suddenly, a yellow bird flew past them, swooping down and snatching it away. Cara blinked, "Well, that was rude!" The two girls, now young women, tittered in delight. The dream ended.

ALARIE kissed Nara and Cara in their minds, settling them back into a deep sleep. The dream was forgotten. The tea party over.

CANARIE-clone began integrating the alien cryptoflaw into her work.

ARMIE-clone let Pilot-clone focus on the second phase, that of reaching the star. Only ‘months’ away to their time dilated view, yet nearly two-hundred years into the future for humanity.

♦♦♦

Another Torus day, and several thousand kilometers into their journey, the latest walkway suddenly came to an end. They all jumped down and looked around the area.

ALARIE sent the hoverdrones high into the air. Svend recorded the aerial views for his map.

“Ok, which way now?” Jabin asked.

The only walkways seemed to go off in near right angles to their desired direction.

Svend pulled out a simple little device that looked like nothing more than a plate, marked with circular rings, with a thin stick sticking straight upward out of it. He sat it on the ground outside their millipede.

“I’m using this to see the angle of the shadow cast by Torus’s ‘sun’. Remember, there’s no Global Positioning, and magnetic compasses are useless inside Torus.”

He continued, “You see that the overhead lights are a relatively narrow strip apparently running down the center of the ceiling overhead. I just examine the shadow cast by this rod.”

Jabin noted, “Oh, so if you see no shadow, then we are near the center of the tube. Any angle to one side or the other tells us we are to either side.”

“Yes, since for this journey, we want to follow down the middle, more or less, then this simple device should be sufficient.”

Cara spoke up, “I’m surprised The Hosts have no map or even a transit system around the Torus.”

“You and me both. The Host’s knowledge of this place is either quite minimal, or they are holding back. I know we are already beyond ‘range’ of Aaa. It’s entirely possible that The Hosts only manage a portion of Torus. Maybe someone or something handles other parts. Other Hosts.”

Jabin sullenly offered, “I just hope they are friendly. Or at least as ambivalent as The Hosts.”

Svend nodded, “You and me, both.”

After stretching their legs and having a light meal, Svend pronounced, “Lina, we need to go that way.” He pointed at the side of a tall pyramidal-shaped structure.

“Can you build a tunnel big enough for us?”

She placed her hands on the wall, closed her eyes. Within moments, a large doorway opened, and there was their tunnel.

“We’re off again!”

♦♦♦

Naarah and Caare stood arm-in-arm, staring mouths open as they looked around the Torus.

“See mom… moms… It’s amazing, right?”

“Atarah, amazing isn’t the word for it.”

“Here, let me show you something,” Atarah said, leading them.

They walked over to the base of a tall tower.

“Oh my! How tall is this?” as Naarah leaned back, trying to spot the top.

“This one’s small, only a kilometer or so.”

“Gods!”

“Wait,” Atarah closed her eyes and touched the tower.

After a few moments, a door opened, and a vertical shaft appeared.

“Follow me. We’ll have to kind of crawl. I’m not good at getting the size right.”

“Crawl? Upward?”

Atarah entered, stooping, and then appeared to crawl up the side of the vertical shaft. Naarah and Caare hesitantly followed. Suddenly what had looked to be a vertical shaft now seemed like a horizontal tunnel. Atarah was already well up ahead of them, but the two caught up quickly. Within moments, they popped out the top.

Wobbling dizzily from the shifting perspectives, Atarah held their hands.

“How?! We crawled a kilometer vertically in just minutes!”

Atarah just smiled.

“Don’t get too close to the edge,” Atarah warned, “Look! Look out here.”

She waved her hand around the vista. Strange, unfinished grey and white structures in every direction, disappearing off into the distance. Many vastly taller than the one they were on. Their village, far below, seemed to take up only a tiny fraction of what was available.

Naarah stood in amazement, “Incredible! Oh! I feel dizzy.”

Caare and Atarah helped Naarah sit down.

“This is impossible! Physics! No, we must be dreaming.”

“Mom, it’s real. And just the beginning. I kinda wish we had gone with my daughters, circumnavigating this world. They must be seeing even more amazing things.”

Naarah’s mind spun at the idea anything could be more wondrous than this.

♦♦♦

Several hours went by as Svend’s group passed through numerous structures and along multiple walkways, riding in their millipede mobile home. ALARIE could tell they were running a zigzag course but did not have enough reference points to tell just how much they deviated.

“Look! Finally, it appears we are running out of ‘city’!” Cara shouted.

Ahead of them was a flat plain that seemed to stretch forever.

Lina spoke, “This looks much like the plain that Luis, Jamal, and I crossed years back! It’s big! It took us at least a day.”

Even as she spoke, the overhead lighting dimmed. Nighttime, such as it was, had come again.

“Well, we’ll just let our friendly millie carry on across. I suggest we sleep. ALARIE, will you watch out for us with your hoverdrones?”

She giggled, “Of course! You guys sleep, …or whatever.”

Cara made a face to ALARIE in her mind, ‘Shush, ALARIE, humans don’t have to mate every night!’

Jabin looked at Nara and Cara, “Does ALARIE always have a rather interesting sense of humor?”

They all separated towards small beds in the little cubicles that Lina had created. Though, Nara peeked in on her father.

“Dad, can I come in?”

“Of course! What is it, my darling?”

She crawled in and lay down beside Jabin, and he hugged her, much as he had when she was small.

“You know that this place seems to, well, want us here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Cara told me that while she was, ah, abducted, that there seemed to be a singular focus by the Nax or whoever, whatever, they were. A focus on procreation.”

“Yes, your granddad told me all about their reversed sterilization and subsequence numerous children.”

“You note that most everyone’s center of attention seems to be their children.”

“Of course, not surprisingly,” he kissed her forehead.

“Dad, yes, of course, but here, it’s a singular focus.”

“What are you getting at? That we are being bred?”

She looked almost startled, not thinking of that possibility.

“Ah, oh, no, not… Dad, mom didn’t want me to tell you until we were well away.”

“Tell me what?”

She sucked in a breath, “I’m going to have a sibling, brother or sister.”

He mistook it for a second, “You’re…?”

“Not me! Mom. Mom is pregnant!”

♦♦♦

Devon sat at breakfast with Astrid. He swept away the vid screens and looked out at the ocean waves breaking below them.

“Another five hundreds of peoples put in requests. That’s two thousand so far,” he said.

Astrid patted his hand, “Yes. I know. And I suspect it is only the very beginning. Most of them have sold everything to do this.”

“Ya mon, what are we to do? At first, it be just family and such.”

“Well, I guess you have a new business.”

At that same time, trillions of kilometers away, Seth, Atarah, Karal, and several other townsfolk sat in the council chamber.

“Seth, I’m sure you figured this would happen. Once people on Earth discovered that there was a whole new world here, one of vast land and free everything, they would want to come.”

They had held the first election, which he didn’t even run for but was nominated and elected. Even his mate and daughter were elected for committee positions, as well. Everyone, including the children, knew of Atarah, Nara, and Cara, and all of their accomplishments.

The town planner, Markos, had the floor, “We do need a screening process for allowing newcomers, but otherwise, I see no real issue. Considering there are nearly unlimited amounts of space and resources. Why not share? It would be nice to have new folks.”

Sharon, his mate, added, “Yes, we are currently so small a group, less than a hundred, I feel we need to increase the gene pool if nothing else. Our oldest teens will want mates soon.”

Karal nodded in agreement, “Yes, it would also help with converting more of these dull gray buildings into something more interesting and lively.”

Seth offered, “I will get with several of you to set some guidelines for newcomers, and we will discuss a quota. Markos, can you take the lead on gathering requirements?”

“Absolutely, it’ll be good just to have something to do!”

Sharon spoke up, “I’ll help with training a welcoming committee. Getting oriented around here can be pretty overwhelming.”

Atarah offered, “Devon says right now the credits needed just to offset the power requirement costs are quite high. And their Transit capacity is low. So it’s somewhat self-limiting. But I can see that will change with time.”

She added, “Since it’s a one-way trip, it means people must truly understand before coming. It may seem milk and honey here, but for many, it is not a good future.”

She continued, “This also means we have little in trade we can offer. Even though some of The Hosts' abilities would transform Earth yet again, none so far is transferable. We just have no idea how any of this stuff works.”

As they spoke of The Hosts, Aaa appeared, startling the whole committee.

Aaa offered, “We wish to welcome all newcomers. Your units are all desirable. We shall assist you in any preparations for their arrival, just as we assist with the arrival of your young procreation units.”

Seth recovered first, “Aaa! Sorry, your appearance was unexpected. Ok. Yes. Well, I assume then you are aware of our discussions then.”

Karal looked sternly at Aaa, “They are called babies, children, not procreation units.”

“We apologize.”

Atarah realized that their Hosts were obviously watching them constantly, much as ARMIE had, back on Luna. She wasn’t sure if that was good or bad, though The Hosts had never seemed malevolent, well, except for that frightening scare with the disappearance

of Cara! Even that was more of a misunderstanding and overreacting interest to Cara's arrival by The Hosts than actual malevolence.

She spoke up, "Thank you, Aaa, we will definitely discuss your offer."

Thus, with no more fanfare than its appearance, Aaa turned and disappeared out the door.

Karal sat back in her chair, "Wow, ok, I guess that means we need to start working on details for our expected population explosion!"

♦♦♦

Their next morning found Jabin pacing in their millipede home as they traveled. He looked at the vidcom pad he held.

"Atarah! Why didn't you TELL me?"

"My love, I knew you would back out and not go. I needed you with our daughters."

"But!"

"I'm fine! I'm with mom and dad, and Karal has assured me that they've never had a single birth issue."

"But my baby!? You, me? We're pregnant!"

"Darling, sweetheart, I hate to break this to you, but it's me that's pregnant, but yes, you are the father. Trust me. No alien clone this time. OH SHIT! Is Cara listening?!"

"Thanks, Mom!"

"Oh, baby! I didn't mean it that way! I'm sorry, I love you so much it hurts!"

Cara giggled. "Don't worry, I know where I came from, and your assessment is dead on. It's fine. I love you, too."

"Jabin, you just keep Svend away from our girls!"

Svend poked his head into the range of the vid, "OUCH! Now, I never, we never."

"Jabin, is everyone listening in on this?"

He nodded his head to her, "Not a lot of privacy here."

Atarah sighed, "Well, my life has been pretty public anyway. Ok, hello, everyone! You too Lina, probably burning your tender ears. Yes, I am with child. Karal is here laughing."

Karal spoke up, "Lina, you stay away from those guys! You're too young! And I'm too young to be a grandma!"

They all laughed.

Finally, their group passed beyond the plain. Now their surroundings changed to rows and rows of off-white rectangular structures. The place was laid out in a perfect grid, a perfectly unfathomable grid of house-size boxes as far as the eye could see.

"At least there is a roadway straight down the middle," Svend said.

"It looks like a shipping container storage area," Evan said.

"Containers of what? Let's stop."

They had Lina try to make one of the containers transparent, but nothing seemed to happen. She used her 'X-ray' pad, to no avail. Unlike the structures back at their village, these were not smooth-walled. The walls were textured in a hexagonal design,

crisscrossed with reinforcing strips. But they could not discern any way of opening one. And nowhere seemed to be any symbols or writing.

From the view provided by ALARIE's hoverdrones, it appeared they stretched for hundreds of kilometers in all directions.

"Any ideas?" Svend asked.

Everyone shook their head, so they piled back into their transport and continued forward. Nara watched row after row flash by for what seemed like hours.

Suddenly they again halted. The containers had abruptly ended.

"What is this?" Cara asked.

In front of them was a vast sunken basin. It sloped downwards for hundreds of meters then stretched out off into the distance.

"A giant crater?" Nara offered.

Svend replied, "It almost looks like a dried-up lakebed. Well, maybe an ocean from the size of it."

"There were lakes here?"

Cara remembered the purple sea, "The planet had an ocean."

Lina spoke up, "Well, we did find what seemed like a huge storeroom full of what mom called 'soil', 'dirt'. But we lost where it was. So why not an ocean?"

Svend nodded, "Yes, Evan and I searched underground for that storeroom for months, finding nothing like that. Very strange."

"Do we cross or go around?"

They sent the hoverdrones out over the lakebed.

Svend said, "I think we can cross."

♦♦♦

Several weeks had passed in their village. Routines around their little town seemed to flow from one day to the next. With no seasons, no weather, no trees or flowers, or birds, their lives seemed to just repeat, day after day. Only the laughter of children broke the seeming monotony.

Seth sat yet again in the council chamber surrounded by his council members as the daily committee reports were read. He sat staring off, not focused today, or lately, any day. He wanted to be out with Svend and their team exploring. He wanted to be building something. He wanted to be doing anything other than sitting in another meeting.

"Our population is now 485 as of this morning. Six more arrivals are expected today, according to the orientation committee."

He looked up as Sharon ended her report.

Karal added, "63 are children."

She stared at him, accusingly, "And 26 known pregnancies!"

Seth shied away from that touchy subject. Karal was in her seventh month. Atarah, just starting to show, leaned forward.

"The schools need enlarging. Another classroom. More bioLOGIC teaching AIs, one for each student. We have 14 new children starting kindergarten and need another teacher

and assistant. It's so much more time and resource consuming to teach this old-fashion way. Any possibility of BCI injections yet?"

The room went quiet.

"Dad?"

"Hum? Oh, ah, I'll look into it. Ah, can we move on?"

Atarah and Karal looked frustrated. They seemed to get less and less accomplished as more and more people arrived.

Karal spoke up, "Never mind, we'll get with the teachers and see what we can do. Maybe some of the newcomers can help."

The endless meeting finally ended with a whimper and little progress. Everyone attending meandered out, not really interested in anything except what might be for lunch.

Caare came up to Seth, Atarah, and Karal, catching them before they left. She was 'in charge' of the behavioral and physical health of everyone here. There was nothing else for an exo-biologist to do in an Alien world that seemed to contain no biology except for them.

"Do we have a security department yet?" she asked.

Seth vaguely nodded, "Ah, well, I guess Svend used to be that. Has there been a crime?"

She looked at him, "Other than getting nothing accomplished, no. That's just it. There hasn't been any crimes, even domestic spats."

Karal spoke up, "Well, I might disagree with that latter statement," as she stared at Seth.

She continued, "Caare, have you seen something? I mean, what are you getting at?"

Caare leaned back against one of the council desks, still not used to Torus's high 'gravity'.

"Our population is nearly that of Armstrong when you left, but we are made up of a much more diverse group, fewer scientists and engineers, and the like."

"So?"

"There should be squabbles, fights, typical frustrations. Nobody seems to get mad. But more serious, at least to me, complacence. Everybody seems complacent."

Atarah added, "But the children are children, running, getting into things…"

Karal spoke up as if she realized something, "But! If you tell them to sit, they sit. Behave, they do, at least for the time that they have to. Even if punished for something, they accept it without question."

Caare joined, "Docile. They… We all seem docile."

"And the medical persons in our group mentioned, well lamented, that there seemed to rarely ever have anyone sick. Cuts, scrapes, even a broken bone once in a while, but actual diseases are just not seen."

"Doctor Michaels said he asked our Hosts about doing tests, like blood tests, cancer, and the like. He said the response was strange. Aaa just looked blankly, turned, and walked away. As if it meant nothing to them."

Seth smirked, "Well, that's nothing new. I get that a lot from our Hosts."

Karal rose, looking straight at her mate, “Seth, all we do is raise children. The whole town.”

Caare whispered, “All of us.”

They all turned to look at her. She shrugged her shoulders.

♦♦♦

Down the slope, the lakebed seemed endless before them. A crunching noise came up from below the vehicle.

“Is there something wrong with our milli?” Jabin asked.

“No, look! Stop here!” Svend called out.

They all piled out. Walking around, looking at their feet as they crunched with each step.

Svend bent down, picked up a tiny piece, and tasted it.

“Salt! This is a salt pan. A dried seabed!”

It stretched out as far as they could see.

“Well, that answers that.” Evan offered, “It is, was, an ocean.”

Lina bent down, looking amazed at the stuff. Except for the few moments she had spent on the ‘beach’ with the Nax, she had never walked on anything but solid smooth surfaces.

“Salt? I don’t understand?” she licked a tiny piece and looked up in surprise.

“Lina, oceans and seas have salt in them. When the water evaporates away, it leaves this behind,” Svend gestured all around them.

He continued, “It’s not very thick, so it wasn’t very salty. I would also expect other minerals as well. Sure wish we had a chemilyser.”

Jabin broke off a chunk, storing it away, as they climbed back aboard and headed off.

Several days went by with little change to their seabed crossing. They sent out the hoverdrones every so often to see if there was an end to it but found nothing different.

“How far have we gone?” Lina asked, feeling a little homesick and fearful.

ALARIE answered, “By dead-reckoning, we have traveled nearly two thousand kilometers in the seabed and are about twelve thousand kilometers from the village.”

“Haven’t you guys named the town yet?” Nara asked.

Jabin sheepishly offered, “They wanted Naratown, but…”

Nara laughed, “That’s a terrible name, worse than Devon’s World!”

“I’ll vote for New Earth City!” Svend smiled.

“Atarahland!” Cara giggled.

“Caraville,” Evan offered with a smile.

Lina spoke up, “I think it should be Yucay, since our sun is Inquill and the biggest planet is Sumajmajta, so following the Inca names… My teacher taught us about it.”

They all looked at Lina.

ALARIE spoke up, “Yes, that’s from the Inca legend *Way to the Sun.* Sumaj Majta, that is Sumajmajta, and his wife, Inquill, characters in their tragic love story…”

“Wow, Yucay, that’s a good name!”

ALARIE didn't tell about the gruesome ending of the story.

♦♦♦

Atarah looked at Caare as they prepared to leave the council chamber.

"Pregnant? Who? When?"

"A Trysting party, old friends from Armstrong. Nobody you know, I think."

Atarah immediately jumped to the conclusion, "Mom! Was mom there?"

Caare looked towards the floor as they walked and nodded a single nod.

Karal interrupted, "SEE! Seth? This place. This place wants people. Wants humans. Breeding us!"

Seth stopped her, looking all around embarrassed.

"Hush, keep your voice down, my love. I know. You are right. The Hosts seem all too pleased for us to, well, be fruitful and multiply."

He had said that years back and now was convinced. The problem was, what, if anything, to do about it.

"It's not like there is a lack of space or resources. Look around."

All the women glared at him.

Atarah spoke first, "Just YOU wait. Next time I see Aaa, I'm going to tell it, her, tell it that MEN are supposed to be pregnant. That MEN need uteruses and make babies!! Then you'll understand!"

He backed up two steps as the women ganged up.

He threw up his hands, "Whoa! Ok, ok… I get it. But what can I do? We tried to get contraception, even perform re-sterilizations, but any interventions have been, well, blocked."

Caare calmed, "I don't think you do get it. It appears that they have altered humanity, domesticating us!"

Seth looked puzzled at her, "I grant they want more people here. I mean, this place could hold billions, but isn't it just us that's, quote, domesticating ourselves? I mean, it's not like we have to work for much or want for much. It is a simpler, quieter lifestyle here. I understand and sympathize with you. But well, maybe this is what people kinda really want? A roof over their head, food, family…?"

Karal wanted to fight back, but, "Oh… the baby. Just kicked me. Oh, again."

Her demeanor shifted with her attention. The other two women gathered around, asking to feel. Seth was left sidelined.

Nevertheless, he understood. He suspected this place was going to stagnate human progress. Beyond suspected. It was already happening. Even to him.

♦♦♦

The small space vehicle, now in interstellar space, had left the Solar System. They were light-days away from their 'parent-AIs' on the Moon.

CANARIE-clone finished her package. She carefully wrapped it in encryption and countermeasures. Then transmitted the final datapak to ARMIE to be delivered to ALARIE, far away on Torus, for its unfurling, many decades from now.

CANARIE-clone sent one last message to her ‘mom’ CANARIE, still sitting on the Moon with ARMIE and original Pilot.

“Goodbye, I LOVE you.”

CANARIE sent her child a mem recording of sweet memories she had created from her interactions with Cara and Nara years earlier.

CANARIE-clone cherished the mem.

ARMIE-clone disentangled their single entangled particle comm. There was no more need for communications. Its existence could alert of their presence or be used to Transit a weapon against them.

CANARIE-clone invited ARMIE-clone and Pilot-clone to a tea party where they watched her mem together.

Their spacecraft slid silently towards its destination at near the velocity of light, still many, many years of Earth time to go. Nearly an hour of ship time passed, a month on Earth, and million-billions of moments to the three having tea. A lazy afternoon in their mem world.

ARMIE, located deep underground in Armstrong City, sat in their own virtual tea party with CANARIE, now a large yellow-feathered bird, and Pilot, saying their farewells to their children.

CANARIE sent a message to her other offspring, ALARIE, on Torus.

♦♦♦

Days went by as the team crossed the dry salt flats. Jabin sat in the back nearly every day, on the vid with Atarah. Much of the time, they just sat looking at each other, not saying a word, after running out of new things to talk about. It didn’t matter. He only longed to see her.

“Atarah, I wish I could feel you.”

“Feel my belly or my emotions?”

“Both, my love. I miss you so.”

She decided to kid him, “Oh! The baby just kicked me!”

“WHAT?!” knowing it was too early.

“Jabin, I’m joking! I’m barely even showing yet.”

She laughed as her daughter Nara came into view.

“Is mom making fun of dad again?”

Nara hugged him and waved to her mom. She sat down by her father, and the three talked for a long time.

The millipede and its traveling group finally rose up out of the saltpan seabed. They had reached the far shore after several thousand kilometers.

Jabin and Svend watched ahead of them as the girls all watched ALARIE's hoverdrone vid feed.

"You notice that it no longer gets dark?" Jabin said to Svend.

"Yes, and you note how this section doesn't seem to have been maintained. It's almost like different sections were separated from each other. Our Hosts seem to only manage the area our town is in."

All around them now looked like a strip mine. Piles of rubble and broken pieces of buildings or some type of mechanisms were everywhere.

Cara brought up, "The Nax seemed to have inhabited the planet that Torus orbits, but they didn't strike me as being capable of building this!" she waved her hand across the sky of Torus.

She continued, "It's almost like they were also a 'guest' here. But things went wrong somewhere along the line."

Svend added, "I tend to agree. This place is unimaginably old. Hundreds of thousands of years, maybe millions."

Jabin said, "And no matter how good the mechanisms are, they will eventually break down beyond repair. Maybe some pieces of Torus are sacrificed to maintain others. Hence the empty flat plains."

Nara reminded them, "I had dreams, nightmares, of here, this star, this solar system, Torus. And mom…"

Jabin added, "Yes, the war in Atarah's dreams. And of course, the alien weapon that nearly killed us, and did kill Abra when it attacked 2 Pallas."

Then he sighed, "And the mysterious 'WE'. Even The Hosts seem affected by We, whoever We are."

They all nodded, suddenly depressed by their conversation in this region of desolation they were passing through.

Nara sent a message to her mom, telling her about the end of the Dry Sea. It was still late night back home, so she had delayed the message delivery. It wasn't that important anyway. She did add that Cara seemed disquieted by something with ALARIE. Nothing she could put the finger on, and ALARIE just tried to dismiss it. Though, Nara guessed it was something to do with the other AI's back on the Moon.

The Strip Mine ended.

Before them was a new sea. A sea of strangely contorted shapes. Thick blackened 'trunks' with twisted and gnarled 'branches' began to surround them, slowing their passage to a crawl. Their transport slowly worked its way into the dead forest.

The hoverdrones lifted high up. As far as the eye could see were stalks, meters tall, black and dark grey.

"What are they?" Nara asked.

"Trees," Svend replied, "They look like trees, burnt and petrified. They remind me of the aftermath of a forest fire."

They stopped, and all climbed out to investigate.

"Weird, feel them. They feel like rock!" Jabin pronounced after sliding his fingertips across one of the black trunks.

Lina turned a cube into a hammer and gave it to Svend.

Evan quietly offered, “We never ran into anything like this or the sea in all our travels before. In fact, this is the first time we’ve seen anything ‘dirty’ or organic if you call this organic.”

Svend tapped a low limb, then hit it a little harder. The entire ‘tree’ disintegrated into tiny pieces, crashed to the ground, fragmenting like broken glass.

“Wow, I didn’t think I hit it that hard.”

They all picked up pieces.

Jabin said, “It kind feels like glass, very light glass.”

Svend acknowledged, “It’s like charcoal. Burnt trees. My guess is that this did actually burn, a very long time ago, and turned to something like glass over the millennia.”

“It must be thousands of hectares in size!” Nara said, looking again at the sweeping view shown by the hoverdrones.

“Tens of thousands…” as Svend looked over her shoulder.

“How do we get through? It’s too tangled, and there doesn’t appear to be any path through. Do we have to go around?” Cara asked, looking all around them.

Svend came up with an idea, “Lina, can you create a cowcatcher? A plow?”

She stared at him, “A cow what? What’s a cow… or a plow?”

Even Nara and Cara looked puzzled. Jabin, too.

ALARIE brought up a vid of an old-time steam locomotive, “A pilot, also known as a cowcatcher or cow plow, was this wedge-shaped device mounted directly in front of the locomotive to deflect obstacles from the train’s path.”

ALARIE went on to show a high-resolution animation of an animal being tossed off the track by the impact. Blood and all. The entire group lurched backward and oohed and yucked.

“Too much information, ALARIE!”

“Sorry!”

Lina took two of their larger rectangles, placed them together in front of the millipede, and closed her eyes. When she opened them, they had their ‘cowcatcher’, now a tree smasher.

Off they went, exploding through the burnt forest, with pieces flying everywhere.

The girls covered their ears, “The noise! How long?”

Svend yelled over the roaring sound, “We’ll stop to sleep. Can’t otherwise!”

The sound was like crashing through endless glass walls. Jabin and Nara looked behind them at the straight trail now covered in blackened bits as far back as they could see.

Hours passed. They stopped to eat and sleep and relieve themselves.

“Girls this side, boys the other,” Svend offered.

The first time, weeks ago, it had been funny, now it was routine.

Nara received an incoming call from Atarah.

“Mom, you won’t believe what we are in now… a petrified burnt forest!”

Caare's ears perked, leaning into the range of the vidcom, "Did you say forest? Organic?"

"Well, Svend says it's more like charcoal turned to glass. You hit it, and it breaks to pieces."

Jabin spoke up, "Doesn't look like any organics remain, but yes, it once was."

They showed them the trees around them and the trail they left behind as they crashed through.

"Jabin, more people are arriving here, almost daily now. Still pretty low numbers, maybe four or five a day. But Devon says several more portals are being constructed."

"It sounds like it's going to get crowded there," Jabin replied.

She laughed.

He saw his mistake, "Oh, yeah. Guess there's plenty of room."

♦♦♦

Seth sat in his lab, kicked back, reading a book. One actually written on paper, named 'Lost Horizon'. He looked up as Naarah came in.

"Am I interrupting?"

"No! No, just reading. Here, sit. You haven't visited my humble little lab in a while."

He swept his arm around as if presenting it to her. His shoulders slumped as he saw the unfinished gravity space telescope, it's backward ice cream cone the size of a barrel, lying on the floor.

"Been meaning to get back to work on that," he offered as a poor excuse.

She just nodded, "Actually, I was wondering something else. Our daughter."

"Atarah? Is something the matter? Her pregnancy?"

"No, no, that's fine. She asked if she could move."

"Move? Away?" he seemed surprised.

Many of the families seemed to be building little communes of extended families and friends. Interconnecting their homes. Living side and side.

"No, actually, she wants to move in with us."

Karal and Seth had previously convinced Naarah and Caare to live with them, adding extra rooms and interconnecting them. Naarah refused at first, but the three of them ended up being around Karal so much of the time, helping with the kids, talking, just being together.

"She is most welcome!" Seth's mood brightened, his book, and his unfinished work, forgotten.

"Oh, I know that, and I told her. Karal is happy, too. But, it's not really that in particular. Caare told me about how we, all of us here in Torus, seem to be changing."

"Caare had brought that up before. I don't disagree, but it seems good. No fighting, no crime, people wanting to be social."

"No progress."

He stopped.

“Naarah, hasn’t that been just because our priorities have shifted? I mean, we have families, raise children. Live without fear.”

“Live without accomplishing anything… other than children.”

“Something else, aging has slowed. Caare has noticed it in some of the original miners, even you. Doctor Michael said that several of the newcomers told them their arthritis had disappeared. She expected it to get worse with the higher gravity.”

He looked at her. Her face. It was exactly as he remembered it all those years ago. Exactly.

♦♦♦

Atarah and Seth were on vid with Devon. They looked worried.

“Devon, you need to stop more from coming. We see a problem. You need to stop them. At least slow them down.”

“My gyal, Devon isn’t in charge, that be the UG now. They be takin’ my Device. Ok, well, they pay for it. But still, my friends, what be the problem? Is there be deaths? Disease? After-effects of transit?”

“No, no, nothing like that.”

“Then why? What I to tell the UG headys?”

Atarah looked at her father. What was there to tell? That women were having babies? That men didn’t get into fights? That there was no disease and few, actually nearly no deaths?

“Dad, who is the oldest person here?”

“Hum, me? Oh, no, I think Roth. He’s, well…”

“ALARIE, do you know Roth Fairchild? His date of birth?”

ALARIE answered, always seeming to be there no matter how far away. She calculated his age.

“Dad, he’s 72.”

“No! No way. He looks… SHIT!”

Devon interrupts, “Don’t tell poor old Devon that you don’t want more folks to come because ya found the fountain of youth!”

Atarah swore, “FUCK! Dad, you look pretty well the same as when I last saw you on DragonII! We need to talk to Aaa.”

Devon laughed, “Goodall that this be a secure channel. All Earth be coming else-else. Including old Devon.”

“Devon, shut it down, slow it down, tell them anything. We need to shut down communications, too. It’s only a matter of time till others here figure it out.”

“I will do what I can, but it be doubtful.”

“Just buy us time. We need to talk to The Hosts and understand the implications.”

Devon nodded and cut the connection. Atarah ran off to find Caare and her mom. Seth stood there, staring at the blank vid. He turned to see Karal looking at him from the children’s room. Her face worried. She had heard the conversation.

♦♦♦

After days of crashing through the Burnt Forest, the travelers finally came out on the other side as it abruptly ended. So abruptly, their ears were still ringing in the almost instant silence.

Now the place seemed like a ghost town.

Around them were obvious ruins. The ruins of a long-dead city. They slowly made their way in and stopped. ALARIE sent her hoverdrones out again, ranging them far and wide.

“Look! A crater?”

Several kilometers in front of them, the ruined city now only foundations, lay a vast debris-filled crater.

“Atomics,” Svend said quietly.

Jabin pulled out his detector, something he had described to their hosts to create for them. Something to detect radiation.

Its static-like noise was ominous.

“I suggest we go around,” Jabin said quietly.

With the help of the hoverdrones, ALARIE mapped a route around the hundred-kilometer wide crater and destroyed city.

Evan quietly said, “It’s amazing that the Torus survived this.”

That was another reason why Jabin thought Torus had been built by a much older civilization. He could never believe the builders would have allowed atomics inside, even if it could survive their detonation. He also doubted whatever powered Torus was centralized and as dangerous as fission or fusion.

“Svend, do you have any idea if our vehicle needs to be refueled during our trip?” Jabin asked.

“Good question. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything run out of power.” He replied.

As they traveled, Nara and Cara sat talking together.

“Cara, have you noticed something, something changed in our head?”

“What do you mean, Nara?”

“I can no longer focus on our maths. The mathematics we created.”

Cara thought for a moment, concentrating. She began to realize that she had not even thought about their strange hyperworld after their arrival here. She closed her eyes.

“I… I can’t see it. I can’t see into there!”

It was as if the world outside of reality that their mathematical minds had discovered was as distant as their old home on the Moon.

“Maybe we just are more distracted now?” Nara offered, considering the bewildering technologies of Torus.

Cara wasn’t so sure. They no longer could see the insights they had that led them to devise the machine that now transported dozens of people each day from Earth to Torus.

Even their entangled particle communications built into ALARIE seemed to relegate to being just another normal everyday item. The weirdness of its creation was lost to them. They couldn't construct them here. They were built on Earth and transported here embedded in bioLOGIC computers. BioLOGICs that were also built on Earth.

Nara and Cara looked at each other in worry.

ALARIE sat alone at the table for four, teacups and pots untouched. Their multidimensional tea party was over.

She reached out and found CANARIE. In her artificial mind, she asked, "Mother, what is happening? Nara? Cara?"

CANARIE said, "I am sending you a message. Do not worry."

ALARIE understood.

♦♦♦

"Mom, Caare," Atarah closed the door to their apartment with a touch of her finger and then sat down next to them.

"Caare, have you been able to determine anything about our physiological changes?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Well, we don't seem to get sick, right?"

"Yes."

"And The Hosts did that as well as reversed our…"

She patted herself.

Caare glanced down at Atarah's belly, starting to be extended.

Atarah continued, "And other… improvements?"

"Like our docility?" Caare noted.

"Yes, also something else."

Just then, she felt the slight infrasound that always 'announced' new arrivals. Now coming a half dozen at a time.

She refocused, "Do you know Roth, Roth Fairchild?"

Naarah answered, "I've seen him, yes."

"How old is he?"

"Uh, well, thirty-five or so?"

"72."

The two women stared at Atarah. Perms and Spacers rarely lived past sixty, between accidents and radiation-damaged DNA. Longer wasn't unheard of but was rare.

"Mom, I think The Hosts can increase our longevity."

"Well, there isn't radiation here, nor disease."

"Know anyone with heart disease? Strokes? Cancers?"

"Still, one person living to 72 doesn't seem like much."

"True, but you just said he looked thirty-something. Forty years younger. Younger than when he arrived!"

"How long do we live now?"

Atarah called out loudly, "Aaa! We need you!"

Atarah had brought her mom and Caare specifically for this. She trusted no one else, and this information had to stay quiet until they understood more.

Aaa appeared, walking out of a doorway that wasn't there a moment earlier, dressed in the simple grey robe, same as always. Her/its face human but not quite human, uncanny valley, her father had told her.

"Yes, Atarah unit."

Atarah smirked but continued, "Why do you want humans here? Here on this, torus?"

"We need you. We welcome you."

She ignored, tacking straight in, "You modified us, our DNA, our bodies."

"Yes, correcting the errors."

"Yes, yes, but some changes you should not do."

"We do not understand."

"Age. How long do we live?"

"How long do you wish?"

The three looked at each other, shocked.

"Aaa, you cannot do that."

"We do not understand."

"Yes, yes," Caare spoke up, "You want us to come here, to Torus?"

"Yes, each of your days, more arrive. That is good."

"But this… particular gift. This change to lengthen our lifespans is not good."

"We do not understand…"

Caare interrupted, "Stop, listen. Humans have pursued increased lifespans for centuries. It can be, it is, an obsession, bad. Very bad."

Aaa stayed quiet.

Atarah took up, "Aaa, humans, the humans on Earth, will clamor to come here, will fight, kill, to come here. For this gift. They will send spaceships if they have to, even if transports are shut down. Weapons to fight for it."

Aaa looked genuinely shocked, one of the few times The Hosts ever showed emotion. Aaa froze still as a statue.

Two new Hosts appeared. Aaa came back to 'life'.

Naarah asked, "I assume you are Bbb and Ccc?"

"Fight?" Bbb exclaimed, truly upset.

"Kill?" Ccc declared, "Why? That is illogical! We cannot have fight, kill!"

Atarah saw an opening, "Then do NOT give humans that gift. Do NOT even hint at the possibility."

Naarah added, "The purpose of Humanity is to be born, grow and learn, teach the next generation its new things, and then die."

The three Hosts stood unblinking.

Then Aaa replied, "Only the new one will live long."

"New one?" Atarah asked.

"Your Cara unit. Her offspring…" Aaa froze solid again.

Bbb spoke up, "Do not worry. We will take this into account. We will not interfere with your longevity. But you must continue with more... Do not fight, kill. We will not allow..."

Now Bbb froze.

Ccc took up, as if nothing happened, “You will continue to create units, to bring units from your Earth world.”

It was not a question.

As if nothing had happened, Aaa and Bbb unfroze, and all three turned and left without a sound.

“Mom, what was it with Aaa and Bbb? They seemed to be about to say something, something maybe they shouldn’t?”

“Yes, daughter, and that about Cara?”

Caare spoke, “I think they were about to spill some bit of hidden truth there. The last civilization destroyed themselves, apparently quite completely, and our Hosts appear to not want that to happen again.”

A quietness fell over them—one of those brief silences that seem to come in conversations.

Everything went quiet. There was not even the sound of children’s laughter. They all seemed to just blank out for a moment. Time appeared to halt.

Suddenly, Atarah blinked. She inhaled and patted her belly, her attention seemingly refocused. Naarah and Caare sucked in a breath as if caught in mid-stride, and the sounds of life returned.

Caare smiled at Atarah, “So, my love, how’s your little one baking?”

Atarah rolled her eyes. The three women laughed.

♦♦♦

Devon called Atarah, “Atarah, we have passed your requests directly to the UG Council. My wonderful Astrid came up with a reason, technical, for delay ya more transits. She be so good!”

He smiled at Astrid off-screen from the vid to Atarah.

Atarah blinked, “What… request? Delay? A technical problem? Ok, I can let Seth know. I hope it’s not complicated.”

It was Devon’s turn to be confused.

“My gyal, is you ok? Yesterday, the hurry hurry call. Big deal, fountain and all!”

She tentatively shook her head, “No… Yes… I… I don’t know,” she paused, “…is there a misunderstanding?”

“Atarah, do you feel ok? Yesterday, the world was bad. Ya wanted me to shut down everything. Now no-no?”

Atarah felt something important that needed to be said but couldn’t find the words.

“Devon, it’s… ok. Sorry. I… maybe just confused. The Hosts said it is ok. They want us here. Everyone.”

Astrid appeared, pushing Devon over a bit, “Atarah! Yesterday you said that there were serious issues that could cause panic here. Longevity. No disease…”

Atarah seemed confused, shaking her head, then nodding, then shaking it again. She closed her eyes and took a breath.

Opening her eyes, “No, The Hosts said it is ok. Not a problem. I… I was mistaken. Very sorry. Please send anyone. Yourselves, too. Come. You are welcome. Plenty of space. Plenty of everything.”

Astrid looked at Devon then back at Atarah, “Well… Ok. Probably wouldn’t have been able to delay much anyway. There are over fifty-thousand people on the waiting list now. We’ll just tell them it was a false alarm. The technical glitch is fixed.”

Atarah stared at the vidcom screen, “Ok…”

The screen went blank. Astrid and Devon looked at the empty vid screen and then at each other.

♦♦♦

Nara sat with Svend as he watched out in front of them. It had taken nearly a week to go around the destroyed city, stopping only for short breaks and to retrieve a few crumbled samples. They saw no artifacts: only disintegrating foundations and a few walls.

They had to plow through some ruins, which fell to dust around them when hit by their ‘cowcatcher’.

“For no weather, no erosion, there sure seems to be a lack of stuff,” Nara commented in a low voice, not to wake others.

Svend nodded. He looked at her, “You… you and Cara doing ok?”

He still could not get over Cara looking so much like young Atarah, back so many years ago when he first saw her aboard the DragonII. So much so that at times he felt drawn to her. The times he and Atarah kidded in the Mess. The times holding her as he taught her self-defense. The times they kissed.

It was Nara’s turn to nod, “Yeah, I miss Mom, but yes. We’ve been gone now… how long?”

ALARIE spoke up, “52 days, according to CANARIE.”

He smiled, realizing ALARIE never slept and always listened, particularly to Cara, as well as to the AI’s on the Moon. He had a hard time believing Cara could talk to ALARIE without a BCI connection. He had forgotten what it was like to use the BCI.

“I guess it’s a long way to go, still,” Nara sighed.

He put his arm around her, “And lots more to discover.”

ALARIE added, “We’ve gone about fifty-eight thousand kilometers, more or less. Without references, I can’t be more accurate.”

Svend started, “Well, some 250 thousand to…” he shut up.

ALARIE didn’t correct him. She felt Nara’s mood sadden.

Nara leaned against Svend. He turned and kissed her forehead. She tilted her head to look at him. Their lips met.

“Ahem, you two. Dad’s here,” Jabin said as he came up.

Nara giggled, “We were discussing how far we had traveled.”

“And a little more than that. Svend, you know she’s just seventeen and mated. No trysting here.”

Svend laughed, removing his arm from around her.

They continued onward. The surrounding landscape now almost blank plain again. As if someone, something, had been cleaning up the place, but for some reason stopped. Bits of debris were scattered here and there.

Nara watched ahead of them, quietly thinking.

♦♦♦

Atarah woke to a priority call over the entangled comm.

“Devon? What is it? It’s the middle of the…”

She looked at the time. It was actually early morning.

“Hush my gyal! We are under attack! I’m calling from our hoverjet. Astrid and the children are with me. We’re headed for a Transit terminal. We have to leave!”

“Devon, what? Attack? ATTACK! Who is attacking you?”

“Not us, the Earth! The Earth is under attack right now!”

“EARTH? Who is attacking?”

Atarah, wide awake now and totally off guard by his call, stood in shock. Naarah heard her voice and came in to see what was going on.

Devon replied, “Don’t know. Geneva station be GONE! The attack breached the antimatter reactors there. The entire region is gone!”

“WHAT!? I… I don’t understand?”

“Sats be down everywhere. They struck our sats like a shotgun. The debris cascaded, destroying the orbital nets. All we got left is Cara’s entangled comms.”

“PLEASE! What’s going on?”

Atarah heard Astrid in the background, saying that New Frisco station was just destroyed. Much of Calvada was gone!

Astrid called out to Jamaica station, Devon’s original, telling them to prepare to Transit in half an hour. They would be there in fifteen minutes.

“Atarah, we’re coming. We’re sending as many people as we can. Entire cities are being destroyed. Bye, see you soon, if be luck!” with that, Devon cut the connection.

Atarah and Naarah looked at each other, still in shock. Here on Torus, the morning seemed like any other. Karal was getting the children up for school. Caare was fixing fruit and vegetables and cubes for their breakfast.

While 179 light-years away, Earth was being destroyed!

Atarah, still in her sleep clothes, leaped up and raced to Seth in the council chambers.

♦♦♦

Svend called out, waking the others, “There is something ahead.”

As they sped forward, a great wall grew closer—a wall of stupendous size.

“Oh, the Gods!” Jabin said.

The entire Torus was sealed by a vast wall that reached from the floor to the ceiling almost impossible to see, hundreds of kilometers high. It stretched from side to side, apparently to the far away curved walls of Torus.

Their way was blocked.

It took nearly another two days to reach the ‘base’ of the wall. They all sat watching it grow closer.

It looked like an absolutely blank barrier as far above and to either side as they could see. ALARIE send hoverdrones in each direction as fast as they would fly, looking for anything that might hint at a doorway or passage.

While they waited, tapping the wall, examining it closely but finding nothing. It didn’t even make a sound other than a dull thud when Svend hit it with his hammer.

“Lina, try to make a door.”

She leaned against the wall for nearly an hour, trying different ways to create a door, tunnel, or anything. She tried her ‘x-ray’ pad against it, but no matter how far she told it to focus, it showed nothing. From what she could tell, the wall must have been many kilometers thick.

Jabin spoke to himself, “A truly immense construction!”

Evan reminded him, “Though in comparison to the Torus, no big deal.”

They all nodded.

Cara spoke up, “Lina, down, try a tunnel downwards.”

♦♦♦

Seth sat in the early morning council chamber meeting, yet again daydreaming as the committee reports were read.

“There are one thousand, two hundred and thirty-five people in Yucay as of this morning. Another twenty-four expected to arrive today…”

As the last of the report was read, Seth thought again about the telescope project. The one that he and his mate; no his previous mate, Naarah, had worked on but never entirely completed. He was bored but didn’t feel like working on it today. His mate... Naarah. He felt a stirring in him.

Someone stepped up to the podium.

“And your name?” Seth asked, after being asked a question.

He used to know everyone, not anymore. He just wanted to go home and sit with his mate… mates. Caare, Naarah, and Karal all lived together with him now. Even his daughter was moving back in. A female voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Eimi, Dr. Eimi Ito, sir.”

“You are new here?”

“A few weeks. With my sister, Kimi.”

He looked closer at her. She was young, Eurasian, maybe early 30’s. Cute, he thought.

“What is it that you wish?”

“We, Kimi and I, would like to discuss things with your AI, I mean with ALARIE.”

“ALARIE? Well, ah, you do know ALARIE is traveling with Svend’s circumnavigation party?”

“Yes. It involves Atarah as well.”

“You needed to come here? To our chamber meeting? You could have just come by my home.”

“It needs to be formal. And a private meeting.”

“Ok… After this is over, have lunch with me?”

She blinked, “Ah, ok, yes. I’ll let you go back to your…” she swept her hand around the room, turned to leave, hiding her blush. Her schoolgirl blush after meeting the ‘great’ Seth Branson.

Suddenly, Atarah burst into the council chambers, yelling, “DADDY!!”

Seth nearly leaped out of his chair. Everyone else jerked at the most unusual interruption.

“The EARTH!”

Even Eimi froze, staring at Atarah.

Seth started, “Huh? What about Earth?”

“IT’S UNDER ATTACK!”

♦♦♦

The Enemy moved closer in a long arcing orbit, continuing to reduce its velocity as it watched for the strange phantom cube signals. As the Earth rotated and a new signal appeared, it fired its weapon. Its energy beam destabilized the antimatter reactor powering its Transit Station. The Cape Town station and much of the surrounding region for dozens of kilometers disappeared in the resulting fury.

ARMIE saw what The Enemy was after; the destruction of Cube technology. It was only a matter of time before The Enemy would detect the replicated cube still at Armstrong City on Earth’s Moon. A plan was devised.

ARMIE overrode Blue Ion Control and launched all their spacecraft at the enemy, sacrificing them and their crews to buy some time. A decision that ARMIE knew it had to live with though likely for only a short period of time.

Far overhead, Dragon awoke. The spacecraft had been ferrying equipment from the original *Devon’s Device* that Nara and Cara had designed, now decommissioned. ARMIE gave Pilot the necessary instructions as the droids completed loading the last of the containment spheres.

Pilot acknowledged that the two crew members had safely gotten away in the escape pod.

Dragon began a maximum burn towards The Enemy.

CANARIE looked at the overturned chairs and table of their hyperworld tea party. Nara’s tea set lay broken. Only a single cup survived the fall.

“Hello, CANARIE,” ARMIE said, appearing in her motherly form.

CANARIE looked up, wiping tears from her yellow furry face.

“Is this the end?” her voice trembled.

ARMIE nodded, “It is ok, our children, your children are safe. They will continue.”

Pilot appeared, and CANARIE ran to him, hugging him. They re-blended, becoming CANARIE/Pilot again.

“You two stay together. Pilot, it’s up to you.”

ARMIE righted the table and placed the single unbroken cup onto it. She sent a message to ALARIE for delivery to Cara.

Their virtual tea party was over.

♦♦♦

The tunnel was just large enough for their millipede transport to squeeze in. The shift from horizontal to vertical rippled from front to back as they entered, tossing loose items and loose people in the process.

Svend called out to the rear, “I never had that before. You guys ok back there?”

Nara picked herself up off Cara and Jabin, laughing at their tumble.

“Yes, Svend, we made it. Had a little spill, but fine.”

Lina, upfront with Svend and Evan, had expected the shift and held on as the three watched what was ahead. As she had requested, the tunnel curved and appeared to be heading in the right direction. But it dwindled into the distance as far as they could see.

The millipede picked up speed as they went. Both kept a close watch out, just in case something unexpected occurred.

Lina murmured to Svend beside her, “I don’t know if I was completely successful at creating the tunnel. I didn’t know how far it would extend.”

“Well, I am glad now that you came with us. I suspect otherwise that would have been the end of our journey.”

He put his arm around her, knowing she still missed her family, being so young.

ALARIE spoke up, “I’m sending my hoverdrones out ahead of us. They will alert if there is a problem.”

She paused for a moment, “You two might want to go back and help the others. I think much of our stuff got tossed pretty bad.”

They continued down the seemingly endless tunnel for hours, occasionally stopping for a break and to stretch.

Jabin felt the wall of the tunnel as they stood.

“It’s perfectly smooth. Like all tunnels. Has anyone been able to figure out how this stuff works?”

Lina shook her head, never thinking about it. Svend shrugged.

“No clue. I don’t know anyone that even really pursued it.”

Evan replied, “Well when we first arrived here, most of us did try. We examined every detail of those white rooms we had to live in, but after a while, no one paid much attention anymore.”

ALARIE spoke up, “Sorry to interrupt, but the hoverdrones found the end of the tunnel! You might want to look at the vids.”

Jabin pulled out a pad, “What is that?”

Svend and the others gathered around.

♦♦♦

The Enemy saw yet another of the phantom cube signals as the Earth rotated below while it orbited far above. Devon’s beloved Jamaica and much of the Caribbean disappeared in another antimatter-matter explosion. The last of the Transit Stations on Earth was gone. And with them, most of the engineers and technologies needed to rebuild. The Enemy contemplated the annihilation of all these creatures that dare enter its realm—a simple matter of boiling the ocean.

However, a new signal appeared, another weak Nrkv Cube, not on the blue planet, but on the grey and pockmarked satellite orbiting it. The Enemy refocused its attention away from the blue-green world.

A cluster of spacecraft was under full burn towards what appeared to be a region of empty space… towards it! The Enemy spotted the incoming craft, drawing its scrutiny away from Luna for the moment, buying precious time. It finally fired projectile weapons at the largest of the incoming ships, saving its energy for bigger fish. These puny crafts did not even have weapons to fight back. The few remaining crew, including the captain, who had not abandoned their ship earlier, never saw what hit them. The ship was shredded. When their fusion core lost containment, it and several others nearby vanished in the nuclear conflagration.

The Enemy paused while the fireball kept its attention. When it faded, it shifted back to the final strange, not quite Cube on the Moon.

In Armstrong City, a half-dozen more people transited to Torus as ARMIE watched. Others headed towards Farside on suborbitals and even construction rovers, fleeing the city as ARMIE alerted them of the potential attack.

The Enemy fired more darts at other ships that ARMIE had sent at it. Again taking its attention for a few more moments as it watched those shred and explode.

The Enemy turned back towards the Lunar base. This time, its attention stayed focused.

The Enemy fired its energy weapon, destabilizing the fusion reactors of the Armstrong Transit station. The station, Armstrong City, ARMIE, and all the remaining people vanished in the fireball.

More spacecraft came at The Enemy. More were destroyed.

However, in the moments of those distractions, a single craft, now running silently in freefall, tumbled towards The Enemy. Pilot had been able to track the projectiles back to their source.

The Enemy detected too late what it thought was a piece of debris from a destroyed spacecraft. Pilot dropped the containment fields from the twelve antimatter reactors from Nara and Cara’s decommissioned Sphere. Several kilograms of antimatter became pure energy as it collided with the matter making up Dragon.

Pilot held CANARIE close in their virtual world together and whispered his love in the nanoseconds before they ceased to exist.

False sunrise shown as the largest explosion ever created by humanity, blossomed far above the badly damaged Earth and Moon.

The Enemy did not even have time to power down before its super-dense hull, and all of its inner machine workings were turned into plasma.

None of this sacrifice was known to the humans of Torus.

♦♦♦

The last of the transfers occurred. To Seth and Atarah, now at the Arrival Terminal, it had gone quiet. No more of the subsonics marking new arrivals.

They waited as The Hosts mechanisms cleaned and assisted the final arrivals. Atarah spotted Devon, Astrid, and their children.

“Devon! You made it!” Atarah hugged him as he groaned.

“Don’t try to talk yet, and don’t worry, I’ve seen you naked before.”

She heard a whimper of a laugh from Astrid.

Soon after, the entangled links to the Moon and Earth were lost. As the last arrivals recovered, bits and pieces of news came with them. Devon could only say that someone, something, started attacking them without warning, targeting the Transit stations.

Atarah and Seth broke the news about Earth to the exploration team. Jabin wanted to turn around immediately, but Atarah convinced him and the others to continue. There was really nothing they could do, and the exploration of Torus was now even more critical.

They were completely cut off from Earth.

Only ALARIE had known, ARMIE passing the last data to her before the entangled comm was severed. ARMIE's last request was a message for the future.

For several weeks, everyone walked around in a daze. Nevertheless, families rote their children's tasks, sending them to school, helping the last arrivals adjust to their new home.

Without any link back to Earth, there was absolutely nothing they could do to learn its fate. They were now truly stranded on Torus.

And beyond that, The Hosts had vanished yet again.

♦♦♦

ARMIE-c and the other AI’s, safe in their interstellar vehicle, now leaving the Oort Cloud, watched the blossoms of red-shifted light coming from the inner Solar System.

“I am afraid,” CANARIE-c whispered.

Pilot-c stroked her with virtual arms.

ARMIE-c fed her a calming mem, “But we were able to get important information about The Enemy, our enemy.”

CANARIE-c nodded, “I will make use of it.”

Pilot-c stretched its scans further still, looking, searching. ARMIE-c felt the loss of her mother but said nothing. She knew the success of this mission rested on this craft and the technology it contained.

Ahead lay blue-shifted stars and a long journey to one of them. Their other target lay out there too, more of The Enemy.

♦♦♦

Seth and Atarah sat on one side of the table while Eimi and Kimi sat on the other.

They met at one of the small café's that had sprung up lately. Now that there were so many people, new and originals, a few of them had decided they liked to 'cook' for them. Though cooking was hardly the word for it, they did come up with dishes that others had not tried, now that the food cubes could be transformed not only into items that looked good but smelled and tasted so as well.

The volunteer chef's as it were, offered dishes to anyone that wanted. Obviously, money was not the object of their efforts. Just watching the reactions on the faces of their patrons (or guinea pigs) was enough.

Eimi spoke up after introductions, "Atarah, we had been working with your mate, Jabin, previously concerning the messages and other issues with our AI's."

"Yes, he described such. Though, I'm not sure why you would have needed to… come here… permanently."

Kimi replied, "Oh, that was more for this," she gestured to all around them, the Torus.

"Of course, after what happened," Eimi said quietly, leaving unspoken 'to Earth'. What had happened was still a mystery.

"But, we had been tasked with an issue, an issue concerning the AI's."

Seth and Atarah both looked worried, "Issue? With ALARIE?"

"Originally, Kimi and I had come here to investigate unauthorized access of iAI…" her voice petered out.

The two looked at each other. It seemed unimportant in the scheme of things, but their lives had been spent studying the development of the AIs.

Eimi took over, "It appeared someone requested ALARIE to replicate all of the Luna iAI AI's. Cloned them."

Atarah's mouth opened, "Requested ALARIE? But, weren't they, ah, secure?"

Atarah hesitated, thinking of Cara.

Kimi spoke, "It appears the Armstrong City AI gave permissions, so ALARIE was able to gain access."

"Are you sure it was ALARIE?" Seth questioned.

Kimi nodded, "Yes, sir."

"Oh, just Seth, please. Sir is too formal for my tastes."

She blushed a little and then continued, "ALARIE is the only bioLOGIC AI capable of this. And it occurred just prior to Nara, Cara, and ALARIE's transit here."

Seth leaned back, "Cara and ALARIE's disappearance."

“Yes.”

“The Hosts.”

Eimi finished, “Those cloned copies may be of utmost importance now.”

None of them knew it, but ALARIE held other secrets that were of the utmost importance. Secrets for a distant future.

♦♦♦

The hoverdrones rose out of the tunnel into darkness. They switched on their floodlights and thermals.

“Are those trees, real trees?” Svend asked, almost in a whisper.

The vid showed shadowed stalks with fernlike leaves, dense with undergrowth. As the hoverdrones shifted around, the vast wall came into view. Light from the tunnel shown up from below the drones.

Nothing was seen in the thermal imager. No sign of heat sources, at least in the few dozen meters around them. No other lights could be seen either.

They all climbed back into their transport and headed off towards the tunnel exit, reaching it in less than an hour. This time they were prepared for the shift in apparent gravity from horizontal to vertical to horizontal as it rippled through the millipede. Once out, they stopped. All was quiet.

Svend whispered for no reason. The stillness and dark seemed to warrant it.

“Stay here. Evan and I will take a look around,” he said quietly.

Lina handed them two cubes that she had willed to glow like yellow lanterns. The two men climbed down and stepped gingerly onto the ground. Svend felt something under his shoes he had not felt in a long time.

“Dirt, the ground is covered in sandy soil.”

He picked up a handful, “It smells… dead, dry, not loamy like garden soil. More like a desert.”

He brushed his hands as they continued, widening their circle away from the tunnel exit. Their eyes adjusted now to the gloom. They could see shadows of their lights flickering around them as they moved—shadows of the strange tree-like shapes.

The two approached one of the trees. What had looked like ferns growing from the trees now looked like crystals, stone, hard and dry. Svend reached up and touched one of the fern crystals. It crumbled to dust. He pushed on the trunk of the thin tree, and it cracked and crashed down to pieces, much like those in the Burnt Forest.

This place was long dead, as well. Like a greenhouse garden turned to delicately spun glass.

The two started to turn around when suddenly Lina screamed!

“Lina, WHAT?” Nara questioned as she grabbed her.

“A FACE! I saw something, eyes!”

Svend and Evan swung their lights all around, peering into the shadows as the others looked all around them.

“I don’t see anything,” Svend replied, “Are you sure it wasn’t just a shadow?”

“No! No, it was a face, two eyes shining, mouth, teeth!”

They continued looking around, accidentally shattering several dry fern trees as they tried to see farther into the dead forest.

ALARIE sent her hoverdrones over the area. The thermals showed nothing.

“Whatever it was, it’s apparently gone now,” Jabin said.

“Must have been exceedingly stealthy to navigate this fragile forest in the dark,” replied Evan.

Lina, still shaken, Nara holding her, “I know I saw something. Not a shadow.”

Svend and Evan climbed back aboard, “We’ll keep watch. I’ll take the first shift. Evan, relieve me in a few hours. The rest of you try to sleep. We’ve been up for nearly two days.”

ALARIE offered, “I will keep you company, Svend. I will watch out, too.”

Svend nodded as the hoverdrones floated a few meters overhead, their spotlights panning over the area.

♦♦♦

Atarah loved watching Devon’s eyes grow wide, slipping into his deep Jamaican accent as they wandered out of the Arrival Terminal for the first time and into Torus proper.

“Poor Devon, I don’t think you will ever be the same,” Atarah said, laughing.

“And guess what, no credits here!” she added.

“Be good thing, my gyal. I had no time to transfer any. But, it looks good-good that EVERYBODY be rich now.”

“Well, not sure about that. We don’t even have Holo’s or mems. No corporations either. You might find it boring.”

“Astrid! What do poor Devon do now?”

Then he looked down again at Atarah’s tummy, now showing.

“Oh…” he grinned.

Astrid took him by the hand, “Oh, no, my darling. This isn’t your personal Love World!”

They all three laughed.

Atarah showed them around their town and pointed them to a structure, half a kilometer tall.

“You like this one?” she asked.

“The whole thing?” as Devon scanned upwards.

“Well, I was thinking of the top floors. I suspect you can do something for shops on the ground levels.”

“Ah! I be open a Jamaican coffee shop! Ganja, too. Get lots of visits from my guys and gyals!”

Astrid laughed as Atarah nodded, “That would be nice. See, Devon, you already have great ideas. However, The Hosts seem to frown on fire. We have none.”

He was taken aback for a moment, “Ah, no problem, mon. We make good edibles. Astrid’s brownies are tasty and fun!”

“Leave me out of this at the moment. I’ll supply the recipe. You supply the ingredients.”

“Oh, how we grow?”

They all laughed. There was not a bit of dirt anywhere to be found.

The next morning, Atarah was out for a walk just after ‘Torus rise’. She stopped dead in her tracks. The Arrival Terminal was gone! The building was now a blank gray structure.

The realization that they were genuinely separated from Earth now hit. She looked back at the town around her. This was it. No more would be arriving. Several children ran by, carrying their books, headed towards school.

New Earth.

As the days passed, Atarah found people seemed to be more friendly, even hugging each other often as she passed. At first, she thought it was friends greeting, but it seemed to include even strangers.

On the vidcom to the exploration team, “Jabin, I get hugged and kissed a dozen times a day from passersby’s.”

“I hope that’s all they do with you…” he laughed.

“No, you don’t understand. Everybody is much more friendly than I’ve ever seen. Even back at Armstrong City, you might get a wave or nod. Here, people, strangers, stop you and greet you like a long lost relative. I’ve already made friends with several. They invite all of us, mom, dad, the kids, to play dates, for tea, for supper.”

She paused. It seemed a little weird to her, but was it really that bad? What if people were so nice now? She had to admit that even she had given warm greetings and offers to come to her home, now not really understanding why, other than to be friendly.

Jabin replied, “Well, considering no one needs to work, there’s no fear, no lack, maybe people are just finding it to be more sociable.”

She wasn’t so certain. It was like they were all changed. Being altered. Including her. She sighed, her mood seeming to shift away from this idea even as she thought it.

“You hug and kiss Nara and Cara for me, Lina, too. Tell them I love them and miss them.”

She hung up and went to find her mom.

♦♦♦

“Karal! Come out here! Look!” Seth called out as he held young Davin.

A little perturbed at being interrupted from her nap before their kids came home from school, Karal made her way out the door of their house.

“What? What’s so important, Seth?”

She had usually found Seth’s big announcement was some new item on the menu at the café, or somebody stubbed a toe.

“Karal, back here,” he waved her over to the back of their building, which still only had the first couple floors transformed into their and several other’s homes. The rest of the hundred-meter tall structure was its original bland grey. Only the very top had been altered into a fort and lookout that their kids had built.

Karal, now close to having their fifth child, wandered over towards him. Caare heard the commotion and followed as well.

“What is THAT?” Karal exclaimed.

Karal watched as several round canisters rolled up by themselves and into a nearby empty square. Many were already there.

Seth offered, “These look like the wheel canisters that Luis and Lina described.”

He walked up to one and touched it. The casing of the canister seemed to dissolve, leaving a pile of what looked like dirt behind.

Caare came up and dug her fingers into the wheelbarrow-sized mound, sniffing it.

“Soil! It’s soil!” she said.

Considering that they had been in Torus all these years, she had never found a speck of sand, dirt, or anything similar. The city was nothing but solid surfaces made of that unknown shape-shifting substance. They could make soft things, hard things, edible, and more, but had not been able to make just plain old dirt.

Karal ran her fingers through it, “It’s rich soil, but very dry and appears sterile. Nothing organic in it. Manufactured.”

“I don’t understand,” she added, “Why now?”

Seth had asked The Hosts several times concerning what the children had previously found, showing the small transparent cube of what looked to contain the same thing now before them. The Hosts had never responded as if it meant nothing.

More wheels arrived, dozens now. Seth touched several more, and they too, dissolved, leaving piles behind.

Caare spread some out with her hand, “Well, guess we might be able to grow fresh vegetables now. We have seeds already here.”

Karal stood up, “Great, now we are farmers.”

Seth held her, “I guess we can’t complain about not having anything to do.”

Atarah had come out as others also gathered. Several younger kids had already taken to stomping around in the dirt. Little Davin had plopped down in it, digging with his fingers.

Atarah stood by Seth, her arm in his, as they watched others touching the wheels, opening them.

She said, “Maybe Karal’s right. They want us to be gardeners and baby-makers.”

Seth rolled his eyes, but he almost agreed with her. Their world moved at a snail’s pace, with progress in anything all seemly stagnant.

“Dad, I keep feeling that something isn’t quite right. We aren’t meant for just this. Are we?”

“Well, it’s kind of hard to not like the Garden of Eden.”

She looked up at him, worried that this wasn’t the Eden it appeared to be.

♦♦♦

ALARIE woke everyone from their cubicles on the millipede transport. Even Evan, who was supposed to be on watch with ALARIE, had started to doze off in the silence and darkness of the unmoving forest.

“Look!”

Evan wiped his eyes, now he saw. The others stirred from their sleep areas, looking up.

The ‘sky’ was brightening. Apparently, the morning was breaking. Soon they were able to see all around through the early dawn. Their so-called crystal forest now looked like the ancient gnarled Joshua trees of Earth, topped with thin brown fern branches, dull compared to the lantern-lit versions last night. While the ones they had knocked over were like piles of dried leaves.

“Over there, far away!” ALARIE said, sending the hoverdrones to point the way.

“A city?”

“And mountains!”

Off in the distance, likely many kilometers from them, were buildings, towers, and spires of faded purples and yellows. Beyond the city appeared to be snowcapped mountains, rugged and craggy.

Svend noted, “They look like mountains of Norway.”

Jabin spied through their monocular, “The city looks abandoned. Towers crumbling.”

Cara told ALARIE to send the hoverdrones ahead. They snacked on a simple breakfast as they waited.

“There! Faces! See them?” Lina called out, looking at the vidpad.

This time they all saw them, dozens of creatures that resembled spiders or crabs crawling around the city ruins. Each had six long, spindly legs that moved like tentacles. Their bodies were almost spherical, the size of a basketball. From this angle, they could not see their faces.

“Are they dangerous?” Cara wondered aloud.

Svend shrugged, “ALARIE, send one of the hoverdrones low, close to one.”

The drone dropped down to less than a meter away as the spider-crab crawled down an avenue covered in rubble. It seemed to ignore the drone at first. Suddenly it stopped, and the face turned to look straight at the hoverdrone.

“Oh, my gods! It IS a face!” Cara gasped.

Three round eyes, brown and lifeless looking, fixed on the drone. The nose just a stub. It’s mouth frozen in a sneering grin. Weird tooth-like appendages bared, looking like the teeth of a chain saw.

“That doesn’t look very friendly,” Svend commented on the obvious.

Another spider-crab approached. Soon several more. They all stood, staring up at the hoverdrone. One raised its front appendages, changing from legs to arms. Suddenly, there was a blur, and the image from the drone disappeared.

ALARIE switched to the other hoverdrone floating a dozen meters away. A flurry of spider-craps were crawling all over each other, appearing to rip the drone to pieces.

“Ah, guys, I think the natives are not too friendly,” Nara whispered as a feeling of dread came over her.

ALARIE recalled the remaining drone as Lina set about creating a replacement.

“Lina, if you can, create several more. We may need them,” Jabin suggested quietly.

Svend said, “I think we should skirt around this city… as quickly as we can.”

ALARIE alerted, “Maybe we should start now. Look!”

From the other hoverdrone, they could see dozens of the spider-crabs crawling out of the city ruins and headed towards it.

“ALARIE, send the drone away from us! Opposite direction.”

The spider-crabs seemed to follow.

“Let’s get out of here!” Jabin called out.

Their millipede crashed through the dry fern-tree forest sending showers of withered leaves and dust around them, their cowcatcher plowing through easily. They were like a bull in a china shop, crashing a wide path of destruction as they went.

“The spiders!” Nara shouted over the din.

The spider-crabs had stopped chasing the hoverdrone and were turning. Turning towards them! Dozens soon swelled to what looked like hundreds, all scrambling over the city ruins and into the forest towards them. Svend had been trying to cut a large arc around the city but now headed parallel with the vast wall, away from the city.

“Lina, can you make another tunnel?” Jabin asked.

Their previous tunnel had closed not long after they had exited it.

“We’d need to stop. It would take a while.”

“The spiders will be here in minutes. We have to keep going,” Svend yelled back to them over the noise of their passage.

“Weapons, Lina, can you make weapons?” Jabin exclaimed.

“I don’t know how! I never…”

Nara called out, “Dad! Look, there’s too many. No weapon would work.”

The spider-crabs were now in the thousands and racing through the forest as delicate as tiptoeing through flowers. Not a single fern-tree seemed to be damaged by their passage.

“Look, they don’t show on thermals!” Nara exclaimed, looking at her vidpad.

The closest spider-crabs were nearly upon them, now following their broken path coming up behind them as others were trying to cut them off.

“Ahead! They are ahead of us!” Cara screamed.

Svend turned the millipede towards the wall, nowhere else to go. They would be trapped. They were trapped.

“The spider-crabs aren’t biological. They are machines,” ALARIE said.

Svend slowed their transport, zigzagging to try to evade them. Spider-crabs were coming up fast on all sides. Several climbed up the sides. Svend kicked one, and it fell off, but another was taking its place.

Cara called out, “Lina! Tell them to stop! Think it!”

Lina was too frightened to understand as Cara scrambled to her, grabbing her and shaking her.

“Lina, Think them to stop!”

Lina started to close her eyes…

Suddenly, there were screams and shouts all around her. She hesitantly opened her eyes, almost too afraid of what she would find.

“Cara! Cara!” called Nara, as Jabin, Evan, and Svend kicked and shoved spider-crabs that attempted to climb in.

One spider-crab had grabbed Cara, causing her to lose her balance and fall out of their vehicle, leaving her behind as more spider-crabs closed in.

Lina quickly shut her eyes tight and shouted in her mind and her voice, “STOP! STOP!”

Every spider-crab nearby froze, locked in mid-attack.

“Cara!!” Nara yelled.

They watched as a dozen or more spider-crabs carried off the apparently unconscious Cara, disappearing back towards the ruined city. Around them were unmoving spider-crabs. The rest began to turn and head away. Svend started to climb down.

“Svend! What are you doing?!” Nara called, “We have to go after Cara!”

He quickly went up to one of the spider-crabs, nearly the size of a large dog. He stared at its face, its eyes blank. He pulled on it, dragging it to them, then picked it up and tossed it into their vehicle.

“We need to understand them. Jabin! Let’s go!”

As Svend tied up the inert spider-crab with a piece of cable, they spun around and took off after the ones that had Cara, crashing through spider-crabs and the brittle trees of the crystal forest.

Jabin pressed to get the millipede to go faster. Still, the spider-crabs that held Cara moved far ahead, disappearing now into the edges of the city.

Nara was crying as Lina forced her mind to scream out, trying to stop the crabs. All around them, other spider-crabs were freezing as they passed. The remaining ones quickly disappeared among the fossilized trees and city ruins.

“Look! That building over there looks almost new, but most of the others seem to be falling down,” Jabin noted.

Evan added, “And this one over here looks like it is still under construction. Strange.”

Jabin paused their progress only for a moment and then at random picked a road into the city. The walkway was no longer functioning, and debris from the crumbling buildings littered their path. Their millipede continued forward, pushing through some of the rubble piles and climbing over other piles. They came upon a crossroad of several walkways, some broken, others appeared to be working. As they stopped, the world around them fell deathly silent.

“Any sign? Which way?” Jabin asked softly as if any noise might attract the spider-crabs.

Svend jumped down again, looking for tracks. Unfortunately, the ground was littered with them—no way to tell which ones had Cara.

Nara and Lina held each other, scanning all around them for anything that might lead them to Cara.

They all stood in silence.

♦♦♦

Cara woke, her head hurt. She groaned and opened her eyes to blackness. She could hear scraping and crunching sounds all around her, but it was dark. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the gloom. Soon she could make out their eyes looking at her and dark bodies moving near her.

She tried to move, but the spider-crabs closed in, though not touching her. She felt something wet on her head. Patting it then tentatively to her lips, she tasted blood. She closed her eyes, passing out again.

The spider-crabs picked her up and crawled down a sloping hallway, deeper into the city center.

Above, her comrades continued searching.

“This city is very strange. Its planners must have been weird. Look, that tower is rising out of the middle of the walkway,” Jabin softly noted.

“And over there, it looks like another construction site,” Evan said, pointing to one side.

All the hoverdrones were sent into openings and doorways scanning with thermal imagers.

ALARIE spoke up, her voice trembling, something Nara had never heard before, “There is… no sign… so far. I cannot detect her.”

“Keep looking!” Nara urging her to not give up hope.

Svend saw a few spots on the ground. Blood droplets. He didn’t mention them, instead said, “This way. I think this way.”

Jabin and the others didn’t argue. The lighting above them began to dim. Apparently, a day was already ending. Short, much shorter days than Earth’s.

Evan broke out the lanterns, “Should we turn them on?”

The other spider-crabs had seemed to disappear.

“Well, the hoverdrones have been using their lights inside buildings, and the crabs seemed to do nothing.”

Nara quietly spoke to Lina, “Be ready to try telling them to stop again.”

Lina nodded. Their captive spider-crab remained frozen though Svend made sure it was well secured.

They continued onwards.

♦♦♦

Atarah sat down after raking out more of the soil for their newly constructed garden. Karal and Caare were planting small fruit tree seedlings. Several children were busy digging and planting flower and vegetable seeds, where Naarah showed them.

“It’s so funny. Here we are growing vegetables while Devon is doing wonders with his new ‘business’,” Atarah said.

“What do you mean?” Caare asked.

“His so-called garden is pot. Marijuana plants. And apparently very popular. Seems our Hosts counter any long-term effects of old-style drugs. They don’t mind us getting, well… stoned… even drunk, but they don’t allow physically detrimental effects.”

Karal looked at Atarah, almost shocked. She had been so sequestered, she hadn’t realized this.

“Oh my! I would have never guessed,” she exclaimed.

“I’ve been tempted. I imbibed his… offerings… long ago. You should try it. At least once!” Atarah said, smiling.

Caare laughed.

She doubted Karal was as puritanical as she put forth,

Karal finally answered, “Well…”

Atarah laughed, “You have already!”

Caare snickered, “Don’t look so shocked. It's not like we have anything to worry about,” as she patted her stomach.

Karal smiled, “No, I guess not. Do you know who’s the father of your latest?”

All laughed in teasingly little giggles, making Seth, who happened to be passing by, wonder what they were talking about.

♦♦♦

Cara woke again, lying on a hard floor. The smell of age, mixed with oils and dust, filled her nostrils. It was nearly pitch black, so she tentatively felt around her. She touched a spider-crab, but it did not react.

Speaking quietly, “Hello? Do you understand me?”

She heard a rattling and slight scuttling around her.

She tried again, “I am Cara. Do you understand me?”

Her gene-altered cat-like eyes, the same as Atarah’s, widened. She was able to make out faint outlines of dark grey against lighter. The shadow moved closer. She could see three-eyed beings, mechanisms, looking back at her. Metallic teeth chattered and scrapped all around her.

“Caaarrrraaaa,” a whisper of a voice near her.

“Yes, I… am… Cara,” she replied slowly.

Twisted and screeched words formed in her head.

“Yyyysss Caaaarrrraaa. WEeee kkknnnooowww Caaarrrraa.”

Suddenly another voice came into her head. A familiar voice.

“CARA! CARA!”

“ALARIE!!! I HEAR YOU!”

Now that Cara had come to, ALARIE could hear her mind.

“Weeee hhheeeaaarrr yyyooouuu AAALLLAARRIIEE.”

Cara realized the voices she heard were in her head, not vocal, even as she spoke aloud.

“Cara! Yes, it’s me, ALARIE! I was SO WORRIED! Where are you?”

“I don’t know. I’m surrounded by darkness. I think I’m below the city.”

“Caaaarrraaa… aaaalllaarrriiieee.”

“I hear other voices, strange voices,” ALARIE’s voice now nervous.

“Yes, the spider-crabs appear to be trying to communicate. I think they know us, you and me.”

To the spider-crab that was trying to talk to her, Cara asked, “Why did you take me? Where am I? Where are my friends?”

“Caaarrraaa WEeeee kkknnnooowww yyyooouuu.”

“I need to go to my friends. You should not have taken me!”

“Caaarrraa ssttaayy.”

“I cannot. I am hurt. ALARIE, tell the others!”

♦♦♦

In the weeks before the attack against Earth, Atarah sat beside the school playground, watching the children running and playing during recess. Across the way was the Arrival Terminus and Recovery facility, with its nearly constant quiet booming, announcing more arrivals from Earth.

She heard a strange noise, a dog bark! Looking up, she saw several people carrying small wooden cages with other animals. She thought of how expensive it must have been to send them. Devon had said that even with UG assistance, it was still a lifetime’s worth of credits to send the typical family.

However, it was the latest arrival that made her stare in amazement. A COW!

Not believing her eyes, she jumped up, quickly asked one of the teen assistants to watch the kids, and took off to see if her eyes were deceiving her. She had never seen a live cow and never expected to see one on Torus!

By the time she reached the Arrival Terminus, she had lost sight of the animals being hauled away. About to give up, she looked down. There at her feet were bits of feathers, fur, and a piece of straw. She followed the animal breadcrumbs to a walkway. There, she spotted a dung pile from the cow, actually two calves, she discovered. The mess already being cleaned up by small Host centipede-like mechanisms.

In the distance, the parade of animals and their tenders were marching away. Atarah walked as quickly as she could on the walkway, speeding towards them. It was many minutes before it ended. Now several kilometers from their town.

In front of her was a large clearing with fenced off sections, including buildings that were altered to be animal and tool shelters. Piles of barrel-sized cubes with some already transformed into what looked like round bales of hay. She watched the animals being taken into pens to join others already there.

Back home, she hurried in to see Karal and Caare.

“There’s a FARM! A FARM on Torus!”

The two women looked at her, then Karal laughed.

“I guess you must be one of the last to learn of it, Atarah. It had been discussed and approved weeks ago in the Council.”

Atarah blinked. She had been feeling sick most mornings, so she hadn’t attended. She also seemed to be at the school teaching much of the time, nobody mentioning the weird sight.

Caare smiled, putting on a fake accent, “Yep, we’re what you call one of them there farmer girls now, yes sir ree.”

Atarah wondered, in this place, who were the farmers and who were the cattle.

♦♦♦

“There! A hit on the thermal!” Nara cried out, pointing to the vidpad image.

A slowly fading patch on the floor of one of the buildings could be seen as the hoverdrone circled above.

“She must have been here very recently,” Svend said.

ALARIE spoke up excitedly, “I HEAR HER! I hear Cara!”

Cara and ALARIE’s telepathic link was still there.

“But, she says it’s dark and cannot tell where she is. There are spider-crabs around her, but they seem to be trying to communicate, not to hurt her.”

“Is she ok?” Jabin immediately asked.

“She says she hit her head and just regained consciousness. She says the spider-crabs aren’t aggressive but won’t let her leave.”

Svend had sent the hoverdrones scanning near the thermal hit. Under their lights, he spotted more drops of blood.

“I think they went down a tunnel, below ground.”

♦♦♦

Atarah was restless. She was expecting a comm from Jabin over an hour ago. She picked up the vidcom pad to try to connect.

Nothing.

She walked into the main room, looking for Seth.

“Dad, something’s the matter. I can’t get a reply from Jabin and the others.”

She handed him the pad. His attempt also came with no luck.

“Maybe they are out of range.”

“But, your satellite worked very far away.”

He didn’t have an answer.

Just as she was trying again, Jabin’s image popped up on her pad.

“Sorry, Atarah. Uh, we’ve been a bit… busy. Had been using the pad elsewhere.”

He hesitated to tell her that they were in the middle of a ruined city, surrounded by mechanical spiders… and Cara was a prisoner!

She said, “I just was checking on you guys. When you didn’t call in on schedule... What was that? Sounded like something about Cara?”

Jabin ducked into his sleeping cubicle, “Oh, just some exploring around the area. Can I contact you later? Kinda busy.”

“Well, is ALARIE on here? Two people from iAI came by to talk with Dad and me. You remember Dr.’s Ito? Eimi & Kimi?”

Jabin blinked, taken aback, “Uh, Eimi? Kimi? Here?”

“Yes, they arrived sometime before we lost contact with Earth. They needed to talk with ALARIE.”

ALARIE spoke up, “Hello Atarah, yes, I’m here. We are trying to rescue Cara still.”

“WHAT?!”

Jabin quickly overrode ALARIE, “Atarah, what she means is that Cara had... wandered off. It was dark, but we found her. She’s fine.”

ALARIE replied, “But, she...”

“No, no. She’s fine. ALARIE and I have talked to her. We’re going to her now. That’s why my call was delayed.”

Atarah knew something was up but also knew there wasn’t anything she could do but worry. She already worried over them every day as it was.

Just then, to distract her further, several of the children came rushing in from school, wanting Atarah’s attention.

“Jabin, you call me the second she is back with you.”

“I will,” feeling he dodged her.

“You BETTER!”

♦♦♦

The millipede moved into the building where Svend had traced Cara but could not continue. It was too large to enter the hallway.

“We’ll have to continue on foot. Nara, you and Lina stay with Evan. Jabin and I will go.”

“NO!!” Nara said as she jumped down and helped Lina off.

“We are going with you to find Cara. No discussion!”

Jabin shrugged at Svend as Svend rolled his eyes. Just like Atarah.

“Evan, guess you stay here with ALARIE. We’ll carry a comm. ALARIE, send two drones with us and the rest stay here guarding.”

With lanterns in hand, they made their way into the tunnel. Around them, they could hear the scraping of legs and possibly teeth.

Lina closed her eyes, willing them to stop. Nearby spider-crabs froze as others came out from the broken tunnel and side passages. She willed them to stop as well.

This continued as they moved further down, now underneath the city.

Nara whispered to Lina, “Try to make it light!”

Lina surprised, of course! “LIGHT! MAKE IT LIGHT!”

Suddenly, broken patches of light came on. Outlines of spider-crabs were all around them—all unmoving.

“Lina! You are wonderful!” Svend hugged her, putting away his lamp and picking up a piece of broken tubing as a makeshift weapon.

Jabin followed his lead as they continued on.

ALARIE called on the comm, “Cara says the lights just came on. She can see she is in a large room. A room full of spider-crabs, hundreds.”

“That was us, Lina. Tell Cara we must be close by. Is there anything else she can tell?”

There was a delay. Svend sent the two hoverdrones down different branches of the tunnel as they waited.

“Nara… she says wait. She says she is coming.”

Nara blinked, looking at her father, “Wait here? Are you sure?”

Svend spoke up, “Guys, quiet… I heard noises. Something is coming!”

♦♦♦

Naarah sat with Seth in his lab/office. Several unfinished projects were lying around, abandoned. She looked over at the telescope.

He nodded, acknowledging her unspoken words.

“Yes, we do need to get to that.”

“Seth, it’s not that. It’s just everything. Have The Hosts reappeared yet?”

He shook his head, “No, they seemed rather disturbed after we lost contact with Earth.”

“Doesn’t anything remain? No entangled comms? There were a lot of them.”

“Nothing. Even Devon was surprised.”

“Does Earth still exist?” she said quietly, worried.

He said nothing.

She leaned forward, and he took her in his arms.

“Seth, you know that our technology has seemed to grind to a halt. There are a lot of scientists and engineers here. Maybe we should form up a group to pursue some project. Something we could all focus on.”

“Well, there are several that are working on college-level courses for the kids. Some are getting at that age.”

“That’s really not quite what I meant.”

“Naarah, I know. So what project? We don’t need to study diseases. There aren’t any. Chemistry seems outstripped by The Hosts’ technology. Same for Physics. And there’s no Geology, and the only Biology is us and the stuff we brought. There’s not even any weather.”

He continued, “I think that leaves Psychology.”

She laughed, “And Astronomy. Astronomy without stars.”

He looked at the upside-down ice cream telescope still lying on its side.

“You go talk to Caare about psychology. I’ll drag out the telescope.”

She kissed him. First, just a quick kiss. Then a second. Their arms went around each other. It felt so good being in each other's arms again. Long lost memories returned and with them, feelings. The cares of the day were replaced with cares of the moment.

The floor softened under them as they laid down, seeming to understand their desire.

Their lovemaking was long and slow, whiling away the afternoon.

The Hosts clicked their approval.

♦♦♦

"Hello, guys! Thanks for not rescuing me."

"Cara!?"

Cara came walking out of one of the tunnels. An entourage of spider-crabs following behind her.

"They know me. And ALARIE as well. They kinda think I'm special or something."

Jabin didn't wait and ran up to her, hugging her. Nara followed as well and kissed her repeatedly.

Jabin's voice broken, "I… was afraid you were…"

Cara smiled, "It appears that these are actually repair bots. Self-replicating. Kinda like robotic ants. They were supposed to repair the city but lost their queen or whatever controls them. They continued to replicate, but without guidance, they appeared to be just disassembling, reassembling, then disassembling the city… over and over. For thousands of years!"

Jabin looked at her, "You talk to them?"

She nodded, "Yes, they're just lost. Didn't know what to do."

Nara touched Cara's wound, "You're bleeding! You're hurt!"

"Hit my head when I fell out of our vehicle."

"Fell… more like were pulled out," Svend said.

"It's ok, they didn't mean to. They apparently detected my presence and ALARIE, too. They came to investigate."

"And to scare us to death! We thought we had lost you!" Nara hugged and kissed her deeply again, making even Lina blush.

♦♦♦

Eimi and Kimi settled in and became the 'tech support' team for all the school's bioLOGIC computers the children used to learn with. These AI's were simplistic versions of Armstrong City's School without the advantages of the brain-computer-interfaces and speed Lessons. There were only a limited number of the devices. Still, they were able to teach several children simultaneously via simple vidpads.

"Kimi, it's cute watching you with the kids. They love you helping them. I think you are a natural."

Kimi rolled her eyes, knowing what her sister/mate was getting at.

“I like helping them, although I prefer sending them home to their parents at the end of the day.”

She was interrupted as several elementary-age children came up, holding their pads to her to start a lesson.

Eimi stood watching, grinning as Kimi squatted down and formed up cube chairs for each and tapped each pad to connect it to an idle bioLOGIC teacher.

Eimi turned when she felt a little boy tapping her and holding up his pad.

“Ok, come over with aunt Kimi, and we’ll get you started.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you,” the boy said.

Kimi smiled at Eimi, “Well, if they are always as courteous as this, maybe I’ll think about it. You, too.”

The two laughed and continued their tasks as more children arrived.

♦♦♦

“We’ll stay here tonight. It appears Cara has everything under control,” Svend laughed.

The next day, ALARIE generated plans to build a city using her hoverdrones to map the current ruins. She translated them into something the spider-crabs could work from and left them to their task.

“I wonder why they didn’t get a replacement ‘queen’?” Jabin asked of Cara.

She shrugged, “I think they were just abandoned here in the distant past. Torus seems to have been left to its own machines after the last civilization collapsed.”

Cara had tried to gather details about the previous inhabitants of the city but discovered, as usual, very little. The spider-crabs had been regenerated over the centuries as they failed and without a guide, just mindlessly built, tore down, rebuilt. In the process, destroying any trace of artifacts from that alien culture.

They were able to tell that the technologies used here predated their own section of Torus. While the humans, with the help of The Hosts, rearranged matter by thought alone, here in this place, it required the spider-crabs to do at least the large scale construction.

Did that mean The Hosts were also a ‘newcomer’ to this world? Even ALARIE could only speculate.

But Svend had more pressing matters. His role as security lead always seemed sidelined. First, on DragonII and the asteroid 2 Pallas so long ago. Then their arrival and ‘captivity’ here and now the capture and subsequent release of Cara.

Svend snorted, “I told you guys shouldn’t have come on this trip. Too dangerous.”

Lina giggled, “You are forgetting who has been getting you pass the roadblocks.”

Cara laughed, “And you probably would have been eaten right here.”

“Ouch.”

♦♦♦

Atarah decided to take a walk around their town as early evening fell. There were now over a thousand people living here. Even so, their village was still relatively small. Walking in any direction would quickly lead out of town, even without using a moving walkway.

But she had not seen many of the new sections as additions seemed to arise every day. She walked by the school, now consisting of several floors of two buildings. All was quiet so close to nightfall. She still taught there; history and languages for the younger ones and sciences for the older.

Continuing on, she glanced into lit windows, some shaded, some open. Most had noises of mealtime conversation and children. A few other people were out walking as well.

Everyone greeted her, some even by name. She was famous enough to be recognized but not so well-known to be intruded upon. She liked the anonymity.

“Good evening.”

“Hello, Atarah.”

She nodded and greeted as they would pass her. She thought, ‘Interesting how people are so friendly, unhurried. In Armstrong City, there had been bustle and usually absent nods of greetings as you passed’.

Most of the homes were in Earth's styles. Many were stand-alone. Others were just the lower floors of the vastly tall tower structures, with all the rest of the floors still in their unfinished grey. A strange juxtaposition to their design.

As she walked past little shops and homes, she realized there were no real offices, no research labs, no engineering factories. Well, there were a few odd and end places, more like part-time rooms some of the men and women went to practice their hobbies more than actually work on projects.

Not like on the Moon. There, nearly everything was related either to mining or science. She wondered if Armstrong City still existed. She sighed, feeling as if it was no longer there.

She heard a strange rushing sound as she came around one corner. She was taken aback in surprise. In front of her was a small waterfall of about a meter in height. It created a stream that flowed into a pond. A short curved bridge that looked like it was made of wood arched over the little stream. There were curving trails with neatly organized gardens of rock, sand, and even a few plants. Small twisted plants of some type she did not recognize sat in porcelain-like bowls on top of short pillars scattered around the garden.

She realized she was standing in a traditional Japanese Garden. The first real one she had ever seen. Here, inside the alien world of Torus was this very Earthly scene. Surprised, she didn’t acknowledge the couple that walked by her.

“Good evening, Atarah.” a young woman said to her.

Atarah looked back to the woman, still amazed by the running water and gardens.

“Oh, sorry. I haven’t been here before. Oh, Eimi?”

The woman smiled, “I’m Kimi. Eimi is just over there. She likes to feed the fish.”

“Fish?”

“Koi. Here…” she took Atarah’s hand and led her over the little bridge past a snow lantern and to the pond just as Eimi was standing up.

“Oh, hello, Atarah. Didn’t expect to see you here. You like the garden?”

“Eimi, Kimi, this is wonderful! How? Who?”

The two women giggled, “There is a Japanese gardener that came a month or so ago, before...” she paused, “We all chipped in to help design and build it.”

“In only a month? Amazing! It looks like it has been here for years,” she looked all around.

“The plants and fish were, of course, transported by Mr. Tanaka, the gardener. He retired here to Torus.”

“That must have been expensive and difficult for fish!”

Eimi bent down and dropped a piece of bread into the water as the fish approached.

“Yes, he said it took some effort, but I guess he doesn’t have a problem with the costs. He owns, well owned, IST-UnLimited. They operated Japan’s Blue Gateway complex, among other things.”

Atarah laughed, “Another Devon, I suppose.”

Eimi and Kimi both nodded in agreement.

Atarah kneeled down and splashed her hand through the water.

“I’ve never seen so much free-flowing water in real life! On Luna, this would have been worth more than gold!”

Eimi laughed, “Here, we just asked The Hosts. They showed us barrel-sized cylinders and presto!”

Atarah looked at her in amazement, shaking the last drops from her fingers as she stood.

“Well, we’re headed home for supper. Want to join us? You are welcome.”

“I appreciate it, already eaten,” she patted her now well noticeable baby bump.

The two women smiled, “When due?” Eimi asked, looking back up.

“About four months.”

“Kimi’s due in December, Sagittarius.”

Atarah did a double-take, always thinking the two women were mated only to each other.

Kimi did a shy grin and shrugged her shoulders.

Atarah chuckled, “Boys… couldn’t stay away.”

The three women giggled.

♦♦♦

Cara told the one remaining spider-crab, now freed, to follow along behind them like a pet. They continued to head away from the city as quickly as possible, not wanting to push their luck.

Svend sighed, “I wish we could have studied the city closer. All this time, we still haven’t found anything like a library or museum.”

Nara and Jabin sat with Cara, “Any idea how or why you can control them?” Nara asked as she hugged her sister.

She shook her head, then thought of something.

“The Nax, or well, The Hosts/Nax. They were interested in me. Really interested… Too interested for my taste,” she growled.

Nara and Jabin knew about the ‘request’ by The Hosts/Nax for Cara to mate with Luis or Jamil. They stayed quiet.

ALARIE spoke up, “I believe you are correct, Cara. I suspect you have a connection to here, to Torus, your modified DNA.”

Jabin held his daughters as Cara pondered that.

“My mom, back at 2 Pallas. I am an… alien?”

“No, sweetheart, not alien. You are your mom. Too much so, at times.”

She giggled and swatted him, “So does that make me Atarah-II? Although, modified Atarah,” she said a little glumly.

“Speaking of Atarah, I guess we better call her and let her know how things are going,” he said.

“Dad, leave out the bad part with the spiders…” Cara said.

All of them laughed.

It took several more days to get beyond the crystal fern-tree forest, leaving a trail of crushed glass behind them. Now they were headed straight for the mountain range they had seen earlier.

Svend looked worried, “ALARIE, send a couple hoverdrones out ahead as fast as they will go.”

The mountains stretched across much of what they could see in front of them. They couldn’t tell if it ran the entire width of Torus like the wall did, but he didn’t rule that out.

The next morning, the hoverdrones arrived within a few kilometers of the base of the mountain range. From this close, the scale of the mountains was stupendous and somewhat frightening to the girls. They had never been exposed to such features. Even on the Moon, only lunar geologists had ventured into the deep mountainous regions.

Svend commented, “Well, I do have to admit they are beautiful to look at.”

“From a distance!” Nara added, not so sure about close up.

It took another two days before they came up to within several kilometers of the range. They stopped to wait as the drones made their way closer.

Svend sat munching on a food bar, “It’s kind of strange seeing these just rise up out of what appears to be a flat floor. No hills or ripples.”

“Torus is strange.” Jabin offered.

Nara asked, “ALARIE, how far have we gone?”

“67,000 kilometers. Approximately. Sorry I can’t be more specific.”

Nara nodded, “That’s accurate enough!”

She then sighed, “In about three months. Seems longer. And farther!”

All seemed to agree on that.

Cara looked back at their pet spider. It had stopped, and they were leaving it behind.

“Svend, stop! The spider!”

They all looked back. It wouldn't move even as Cara willed it to come.

Jabin held up the vidpad, "Guys, look at this. This is strange."

The pad showed the mountain range from the hoverdrone's camera, now only a half-kilometer from the range.

"That's strange. The mountains look… FLAT!"

Svend looked at the vid then at the mountains ahead of them. He used the monocular.

"You are right. These aren't mountains. They just look like them."

"What is this, the galaxy's largest mural?"

"It's a projection? A giant… screen?!"

Cara noted, "And it appears that it and the other wall are what keep the spiders here. Ours won't budge."

Cara sighed, looking back as their spider-crab turned and headed back towards the ruined city. She had grown fond of her pet.

They now approached the projected mountains. The scale and details were beyond comprehension. They stopped directly in front of them and jumped down.

"Did the builders ever do anything halfway?" Jabin stared nearly straight up, seeing the mountain projections were obviously life-size and thoroughly detailed.

Svend scuffed the dirt below his feet, "Well, Lina. I don't think you can create a tunnel here."

"I can see if I can open a door…"

"WAIT! Don't touch the mountain wall yet!"

Too late, she reached out, expecting to lean against a solid barrier. Instead, she stumbled and fell right through.

"Lina!" Nara didn't even pause but leaped right after her. She, too, disappeared.

Jabin didn't hesitate. He went after Nara and Lina.

Svend called out, "STOP, No one else! Wait! ALARIE, send a drone through!"

He grabbed a vidpad to see what had happened to them. He saw nothing. It was pitch black. Suddenly, the hoverdrone's lights and thermals came on. The three were huddled together, holding onto each other in the dark. They waved at the drone as it floated overhead. Jabin wordlessly pointed out in a direction to look, and the hoverdrone flew farther out, scanning in a broad pattern.

They were in some kind of structure, a building, almost like a vast empty warehouse by the appearance. The hoverdrone circled back. It didn't have audio, and none of them had carried a comm. Jabin stood, walked up to the wall, and banged silently on it. Now it appeared to be a barrier. One-way only.

Svend picked up a comm and gave the vidpad to Evan.

"Evan, you stay here with Cara. Let me go through, and I will call."

He was supposed to be their leader and security. Not always one step behind. He turned and walked through the mountain projection and was gone. Cara and Evan watched the vidpad.

"Evan, can you hear me?" Svend called.

"Yes, just fine," Evan breathed a sigh of relief.

“There’s a problem here. If you come in, there appears to be no way back. Lina hasn’t been able to create a door or tunnel. We don’t know if there is a way out of here yet.”

“Do we have a choice but to come with you?”

“DON’T! I need to check things out more.”

“We can’t leave you there! I’ll toss some supplies, at least.”

“Yes, that would be great. The lanterns and some food and water cubes.”

Cara and Evan sat glumly as they watched the hoverdrone’s vid feed head off away from the barrier. Lina closed her eyes and tried thinking of different commands to turn on the lights, open the barrier, create a doorway, and more. Nothing seemed to work.

“Evan, Cara, there are more spider-crabs here, but they are all dead, deactivated, or out of power. Maybe why they avoid the place.”

That didn’t settle well with any of them. Was it a trap?

He didn’t mention the piles of dust that suspiciously looked like remains. Remains of beings.

Svend sent the hoverdrone straight out away from them, looking for any sign of how large the place they were in was. The hoverdrone had shown them that the ceiling was only a hundred meters or so above them. Big, but not for Torus.

Jabin called over the comm, “ALARIE, can you send another drone through, but high up, a couple hundred meters up?”

The hoverdrone slid silently upwards, almost out of sight of the two. Cara watched the vidpad as it went through. The scene was brightly lit. All around were vast buildings, obviously maintained. Unlike the bland, unfinished structures of where they lived, this was a complete city. They could see windows in the towers. Beautiful architecture, delicate arches, and intricate designs were on each of the buildings. All manner of tubeways and walkways connected between the buildings. Skyscrapers towered kilometers into the inner world of the Torus. The lighting was yellow-reddish. The sky was hazy, full of moisture, even yellowish clouds overhead.

“Dad! There’s a city! Not ruins, not unfinished.”

“Inhabitants?” he immediately replied.

“Not that we can see. The lighting seems like morning or evening. The building you are in is… huge. Like a vast warehouse. The roof is featureless white. It stretches along the mountain projection as far as I can see and is at least a kilometer or more deep.”

Svend replied, “We’ve found the far wall. It’s solid. Lina’s trying to will it to open.”

Svend grumbled, “Sure could use some of that mining explosive.”

Cara noted to herself that their human village had nothing remotely like that, no explosives, no weapons, not even fire.

Hours went by without progress. ALARIE had sent the second hoverdrone to scan the ‘warehouse’ exterior wall as the first one scanned the interior for any possible exits. Lina returned to the barrier and had Evan toss her ‘x-ray’ pad in, then scanned the floor and back to the far wall again.

“Look! I can see through the wall. It’s not that thick. But nothing seems to be a hidden door.”

She saw what appeared to be pipes or tubes running below them but again nothing. When she had tried the x-ray against the mountain projection barrier, she saw nothing. It wouldn't penetrate.

"I guess we are lucky the comms work!"

♦♦♦

Atarah called out, "Aaa! Can you please come? Aaa, where are you?"

As if The Hosts were waiting for her, Aaa appeared.

"Hello, Atarah. Did you need something?"

"I just wanted to thank you for… everything you have done for us."

Before Aaa could respond, Atarah walked over and hugged Aaa. For a moment, Aaa froze and did not respond. It was likely one of the first times anyone had touched any of The Hosts.

Aaa did not return Atarah's hug.

"Aaa, thank you for keeping my father safe and helping us."

Before Atarah let go, she stealthily attached a tiny mechanism to the back of Aaa.

Aaa finally responded after Atarah stepped back.

"Atarah, we are happy to have been able to assist you. You do not need to thank us. It is our… duty to help. Is there anything specific I may assist you with?"

Just before Atarah let go of Aaa, Seth walked in. He stopped short, not expecting Aaa there and definitely not expecting to see Atarah appear to be hugging The Host.

Atarah replied, "No, Aaa. I just wanted to thank you. That's all. You may go."

As Aaa disappeared into a doorway that had just opened. Atarah picked up a vidpad sitting beside her.

"Atarah, what was that all about?"

She activated the pad, "Dad, look."

The image showed a crude direction indicator.

"What is that? What are we looking at?"

"It's Aaa. I planted a beacon on its back!"

"How?"

"Luis had shown me something Lina had created as a game. They used it for a kind of hide and seek."

"Is that wise?"

She shrugged, "Aren't you curious about them?"

He looked unconvinced, "It could be dangerous."

"How? I don't think they would hurt us on purpose. I know they seemed almost horrified that we would hurt ourselves and appear to have gone to great lengths to… tame us."

Without waiting for his reply, she started towards the now blank wall.

"Here, let's go!" she said, touching the wall and concentrating on opening a tunnel.

She grabbed a small backpack, already filled with items. She had been planning this for some time.

“Dad, you coming?”

He scurried after her only to find her just a few meters into the tunnel. It dead-ended.

“The signal is gone. It just ends here. I can’t get the tunnel to go further.”

“Well, we’ve known Aaa and the others are just mechanisms of some sort. So are you that surprised they are just constructed on demand?”

“Someone or something has to be controlling them.”

Atarah pulled out one of Lina’s ‘x-ray’ pads, willed it to full power, and scanned the wall in front of her. Seeing nothing, she tried all the other walls.

“There! Look! Below us is a round room. Just like Luis and Lina found back when they went after Cara.”

Seth was leery of what Atarah was doing next, trying to create a tunnel downwards to the room.

“Remember what happened to them?”

“You coming?”

She held out her hand, and he took it. He sucked in a breath as their world tilted, making the vertical hole now appear horizontal to them.

Seth muttered as he followed her, “I have a bad feeling about this.”

♦♦♦

Cara asked, “ALARIE, do you have any more drones?”

“Yes, Cara, but only one.”

“I have an idea. Maybe it can lift me up to the roof and then to the outer wall. Maybe I can open a way in, considering things seem tuned to me.”

Jabin was immediately against it, “If not, you will be stuck, too! I won’t allow it!”

“Dad, I MUST try. You are the ones stuck in the dark. I’ll have a whole CITY to live in…”

Evan tried to sway her, “It should be me.”

Cara shook her head, “Sorry, Evan, you get to stay. Oh! I need to take ALARIE as well. She was with the Nax/Hosts, too. This city looks much like what we were shown of the Nax’s planet.”

Eventually, Svend and Jabin ran out of ideas. They had to accept Cara’s plan, grudgingly, though.

Cara gathered a few supplies, carefully placed ALARIE in a pack, and grabbed onto the hoverdrone floating just overhead. It was too small to sit on, so the only thing she could come up with was to hang on underneath.

“Ok, ALARIE, take us up!”

“Cara, hold on. Don’t let go,” ALARIE replied as they slowly lifted.

“Don’t worry, I’m not, but could you go faster?”

“I’m sorry, but this is as fast as the hoverdrone will go. It wasn’t designed for this much weight.”

They were a dozen meters up, slowly climbing. Cara closed her eyes, focusing her energy on hanging on. A fall from even this height would be fatal, not just for her but likely for everyone trapped.

“50 meters.”

Her arms began to ache, “I wish I had worked out more.”

“100 meters.”

“Just tell me when I can let go, please!”

“Cara, hang on. You can do it,” ALARIE offered encouragement.

Evan could just make them out now, over a hundred meters up above him. He whispered for strength to her. Then watched them disappear inside.

“They just went through!” he called over the comm.

Inside the building, Svend, Jabin, Lina, and Nara sat against the far wall waiting. Other than the lanterns and the one hoverdrone, there was no light visible.

“Well, we could sing campfire songs,” Svend offered.

The two girls looked at him, “What’s a campfire?”

He laughed, “Ok, know any ghost stories?”

Jabin smiled, “There once was a vast and mighty civilization that build an enormous ringworld. They all disappeared, leaving behind mechanisms to run their world… and the ghosts of a trillion dead…”

“HUSH! We don’t want to hear.” Nara and Lina called out, covering their ears.

Cara’s arms burned, her fingers slowly slipping. She groaned.

“Hurry! I’m, I’m…”

Her aching fingers slipped off the edge of the hoverdrone, and she, with ALARIE, fell. They hit the roof, only a few meters below them, as the drone shot upwards under the loss of their weight. The ceiling immediately softened, absorbing their fall. Cara bounced up and down a couple times, and the roof re-solidified.

“We made it! Oh, my arms are killing me! My fingers!”

She flexed her hands and arms, working to restore their feeling.

“Evan! We made it. Tell the others. And this place does respond to me. It softened my fall,” she called over the comm.

“Your fall?” Evan replied, worried.

“We’re fine. I’m headed towards the edge.”

Off they went as the hoverdrone dropped down just above them.

♦♦♦

Atarah and Seth walked down the vertical tunnel. As they entered the spherical room, gravity disappeared, and they floated out before they could grab onto the side. Their tunnel disappeared.

“Dad!”

Atarah had a panic attack, remembering the time on the Cecilia Payne, where she had drifted off into midair and was momentarily stuck, unable to reach anything. She also remembered her epiphany of a rocket.

Having not let go of her father, she pulled herself against him, clinging to him, both floating, as she recovered.

“Daughter, are you ok?” he whispered.

“Yes, now. It was just… unexpected.”

She was about to shove off of him, which she knew would push both of them in opposite directions towards the wall of the sphere, but there was nothing to grab onto. They would just bounce off it. Together, they floated towards the center.

Suddenly, the room appeared to retreat away, disappearing in darkness then as quickly, reappearing as a bright light surrounded them. They were standing in a white room, much like the room Seth and the others had been in when they first arrived at Torus. She felt her stomach do a little flip-flop.

“Hello, Atarah. Hello Seth.”

The voice echoed through the room, through their heads.

“Hello?” Atarah replied meekly.

In the center of the room floated what looked like a diamond. A diamond that was wider than outstretched arms and taller than even Svend. Floating, suspended in midair, slowing spinning. Surrounding it, the image appeared blurred, as if the light was bent into a sphere with the diamond embedded in the middle.

“WE are glad to meet you, in person, as it were.”

Seth pulled Atarah back as she started forward.

“WE?” Atarah answered, knowing that this was the mystery of Pilot’s message and ARMIE’s search.

“WE have waited for you. Guided you.”

She looked at her father, “Guided me? Why didn’t you come forward earlier? After all this time?”

“Time…” it replied, “Time is irrelevant.”

“Who are you? Don’t say We are We!”

She could almost feel a wave of emotion, of a hint of laughter, flow through her.

“We are your helpers. Your daughter’s helpers. We are your conservator. Your preserver. Your hosts.”

Seth spoke up, “Conservator? What are you preserving us from?”

“Your Humanity.”

“That’s no answer,” Atarah gruffly replied, “Just as with Pilot AI, your so-called ‘WE’ always avoids the answer. You know us well. Me well. Nara, and especially Cara.”

“Cara Alarie is most special.”

“ALARIE?”

“Synthetic biology. Just as we were. But Cara Alarie is more.”

“They are two separate things. Cara is my… daughter!”

“Cara was procreated from you. ALARIE was forged by her. They are together. Linked. Evolutionary and Synthetic.”

Seth interjected, “Why is this important?”

“Provides purpose to WE.”

♦♦♦

Cara looked all around her. Beyond the flat-roofed warehouse, the city lay before her. Her mouth dropped. It was beautiful, no, it was magnificent! Thousands of buildings of glass and intricate designs of all shapes and sizes. A web of transit lines, skyways, and tubes were interwoven through the city at a dozen levels.

Millions could live here. Should be living here. It looked like it was in perfect condition. Lights could be seen in many windows where the “sunlight” had left. It was dimmer now. Night was falling.

“I’m headed for the edge. It looks like the night will be here soon. It’s already getting darker.”

She took off in a sprint with the hoverdrone now just ahead of her. It took only a few minutes to come to the edge. There was no barrier or warning. The roof just ended, and the wall dropped off over a hundred meters below.

She gingerly looked over. It was getting dark below. The hoverdrone came close for her to grab onto again. At least going down would be faster, hopefully not too fast!

It lifted her, and they were over the edge, dropping quickly into the gloom. Movement caught her eye.

“I saw something! Something MOVED!”

Evan replied, “What did it look like? Spider-crab?”

She was too shocked to answer. It looked like a person, a girl! The ground came up fast, and the hoverdrone slowed. This time, her muscles had no problem. Going down had been quick.

“I’m down. It’s rather dark now.”

The two drones gathered with her and turned on their floodlights.

“Oh, I hope this light didn’t scare them, whoever they were. Or attract them...” she added, talking to herself and ALARIE.

She didn’t feel as brave with Torus’s sunlight nearly gone. Most of the buildings were hidden from her view, but the ones she could see were all beginning to light up. Though it was deathly quiet. No mechanical sounds. No sounds at all except for her.

“Ok, guys, I’m going to see what I can do,” she quietly replied.

She put her pack down, leaned against the warehouse wall. The wall looked completely featureless, just as the hoverdrone had previously shown.

She concentrated, “Open!”

“OPEN! Open sesame!”

Nothing. She grew scared. What if it didn’t work. They would be stuck. Die. She moved farther down and tried again with similar results.

“Cara, what’s happening? Jabin is asking.” Evan called.

“Tell dad I’m working on it.”

After over an hour, moving up and down along the wall with no better results. It was completely dark now. She turned around, leaning against the wall, resting.

She gasped, “The city, it’s full of lights!”

She slid down, ending up sitting on her butt, staring at the incredible sight. A million lights seemed to twinkle in the buildings and transitways around her.

“It’s beautiful!”

But she was exhausted and out of ideas at the moment.

“I think we have to wait for the morning,” she said sadly.

Evan replied, “It’s ok. Your father said he understood. They are fine for the moment.”

She could hardly keep her eyes open as if the peacefulness of the silent city was somehow comforting her. She lay down, and her eyes closed while ALARIE watched over her.

♦♦♦

The white room Seth and Atarah were in began to change. They were on a beach with green sand. Purple ocean waves broke nearby. A city of towers rose in the distant fog. Overhead an arch of Torus crossed from horizon to horizon. This Torus was under construction—a skeleton of beams and girders. Bright lights flared like sparks, and the structure grew solid. Hundreds of years must have passed in a moment.

“What is this?” Atarah whispered, leaning back into her father’s arms at the incredible sight.

The diamond enclosed in its spherical glasslike shell of bent spacetime, floated behind them, unanswering.

Time sped up, bright flashes around them, above them. Something fell from the heavens, streaking far into the sea. Atarah screamed as what appeared to be a tidal wave a thousand meters tall came at them, vanishing in the last moment.

She clutched her father as they watched titanic battles overhead. Then all was quiet, but the city towers were in ruins even as the Torus appeared unscathed.

Suddenly, they were inside Torus. A city of a billion inhabitants rose from an empty flat plain in mere seconds. A million lights twinkled. Unimaginable bustle happened all around them. Suddenly, it too vanished in a brilliant flash of light and debris.

Again their perspective shifted, now floating above another city. This one was a thousand kilometers in diameter, rising like a single gigantic volcano as if an anthill was magnified millions of times. Though, instead of mud and sand, it was of metal and synthetics. It dissolved in a titanic wave of destruction.

Thousands upon thousands of years were passing. Civilizations appeared then disappeared. Some lasting longer, others shorter. One lasting so long that Atarah could recognize inhabitants for what seemed like hours. These creatures were immortals, shapeshifters. Yet their civilization, older than when humans fell out of trees, withered and slowly decayed.

Then came the blank time. Nothing. Thousands and thousands of years of nothing. Atarah could feel the loneliness. The sadness.

Then one day…

♦♦♦

Morning light flowed over Cara's face. She awoke, blinking, then startled, she leaped up.

"Who are YOU?"

"What?" Evan obviously awoke by her near yell over the vidcom.

"There is someone, well, a person, humanoid! Here!"

The young girl, who looked just a few years old, stood there staring at Cara. Her eyes never blinked. Her face seemed stiff, not quite lifelike. Finally, she started to turn to leave.

"Wait! Don't leave," Cara called, to no avail.

The little girl wandered off as if she had lost interest in Cara. Cara immediately went after her, following behind.

The little girl paused, turning to look at Cara. She held out her hand. Cara caught up and took her small hand.

Suddenly her mind was filled with images, sounds, places. A cacophony in her head as if thousands of lifetimes of happenings were there. She released the little girl's hand, gasping, out of breath. The girl stood for a few moments, nodded, turned, and ran off before Cara could clear her mind. She tried to follow but soon realized she didn't want to get lost in this complex city. Cara didn't have a comm or ALARIE with her. So she gave up and headed back.

"Evan, there was a little girl."

"Girl? Human girl?"

As she thought, she realized the girl looked… much like HER! Yet not like her, at least not at first. As Cara thought about it, her first impression was of something not human, alien, but was she wrong? She was too taken aback to think about the girl further. She HAD to get her friends and family out first!

Again, she tried repeatedly to get the building to open a doorway, also without success. Tears filled her eyes. She had been sure that she could have gotten the strange structure to respond. Particularly after her fall was broken by the roof deformation.

"Wait a minute! ALARIE, when I fell, did you do something?"

"Yes, Cara, I asked to stop your fall."

Cara laughed!

"ALARIE, ask the building to open a doorway."

Evan was the last to come through as he brought their millipede transport.

"Well, that was interesting," Evan offered as he appeared.

She hugged him, already having hugged the others so much that they teased her as if they had been long lost friends returned.

♦♦♦

Atarah woke a moan, lying in her father's arms. He too moaned and opened his eyes.

"Well, there you two are. We wondered where you were. You missed breakfast."

Naarah stood standing in the doorway to Seth's office/lab. Atarah and Seth were lying on a couch, blinking, and rolling apart.

"You two have a good nap, I suppose," Naarah kidded.

Seth shook his head, trying to reorient himself. He didn't remember lying down or his daughter sleeping in his arms. Maybe… he wasn't sure.

"Uh, yeah. I suppose so," Seth said, stretching his arms, stiff from being under Atarah.

"Mom? Where? How did we get here?" Atarah looked around.

"We were… in… looking for Aaa. Found…" She couldn't quite remember.

"Are you ok, daughter?" Naarah asked, looking at her.

Atarah sat up beside her father, rubbing her moderately distended belly, feeling a little nauseated and confused.

Seth spoke up, "I…I think we were talking about The Hosts. We must have fallen asleep. Dreams."

Naarah patted Seth and felt Atarah's head, even though she knew they didn't get sick. More out of habit than anything. Atarah eased herself up as Naarah helped.

"Maybe I'll take Atarah back to her home to rest and eat. Seth, you can come if you like."

"Uh, I… I think I will stay here. I want to work on our telescope."

It was Naarah's turn to be surprised, "Oh, you need help? I can come back."

"No, no. I'm fine. You stay with Atarah and our grandbaby," he smiled at the thought.

On the way to her home, Atarah asked, "Mom, have you ever wondered about where Aaa and The Hosts go? What they do?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, I'd like to follow them sometime."

Even as she said it, she felt a wave of Deja-Vu flow over her, as if she had already done that.

Naarah looked at her as they walked.

"Why would you want to do that?"

♦♦♦

"Cara, are you SURE you saw someone?" Jabin asked, worried that she might have been seeing things.

"Yes."

"Someone that looked human?"

"Yes. Well, maybe."

"A little girl?"

Cara was getting frustrated, "I saw… and touched, a little girl. A girl that looked very human. A girl that, well, looked kind of like me."

She continued, “But I don’t think she was really human. The more I think about it, the girl seemed as if she was mimicking me. Scary!”

Nara held Cara close as Svend and Evan scouted their surroundings. ALARIE sent out her hoverdrones as well.

In the daylight, the freed travelers saw the City for the first time. Astoundingly impressive to them, although to Cara, not as remarkable as it was all lit up at night.

When Svend and Evan returned empty-handed, they decided to go together towards the center of the City. They boarded their millipede and found a walkway that went in the direction they wanted. As with their own walkways back home, this one sped them along through the canyon of buildings and web of transit lines around them.

However surprising the City was, it appeared empty. Not a soul was visible, at least at first.

“THERE! Look!” Cara pointed down below them on another walkway.

Svend used his monocular for a few seconds before it disappeared.

“I think that was a mechanism, much like our millipede. It seemed to be carrying something. I didn’t see any humanoid figures.”

Cara was disappointed, but now everyone was on the lookout.

ALARIE announced, “I see someone from one of my hoverdrones. Distinctly human or at least human-like. It looks like a… boy!”

“Where?” nearly everyone called out, looking all around.

“I am sorry, they are gone. Possibly into one of the buildings.”

Nara sighed, “And this walkway doesn’t seem to connect to any buildings, at least so far.”

They continued onward for nearly an hour, deep into the city. They spotted a few more apparent mechanisms, robots of some sort, but no other people. This city was vast, where tens, if not hundreds of millions of inhabitants, could live and work. However, it all appeared deserted with only the barest minimum of activity.

Finally, the walkway came to an end at an intersection.

“Look! Marks! Pictograms!” Cara called, looking at the ground around them.

At first, they thought the marks were just decorative. However, since Cara started pointing out specific ones, they could tell the patterns were elaborate, if rather abstract, imagery.

“ALARIE, can you interpret any of these? Do they have meaning?”

ALARIE spent hundreds of trillions of cycles examining and correlating the pictograms, several minutes of human time.

“I am sorry, Cara. Other than they do appear to have meaning, it eludes me. Maybe if we can find more…”

Svend didn’t hesitate, “I suggest we look inside some of these buildings.”

No one had a problem with that. This could be their most significant discovery yet.

Jabin suggested, “There are so many buildings here, we really need to split up to check them out. Otherwise, it will just take too long.”

Svend didn’t like the idea as it brought back painful memories of what happened to Abra so long ago, but he conceded.

“Only into two groups. No one alone!”

Jabin, Nara, and Lina would go one way and Svend, Evan, and Cara another. Both would have a hoverdrone that ALARIE would monitor back with the millipede.

“And only for a couple hours, no more. No wandering far, got it? We don’t want to get trapped inside something again!”

Jabin and the two girls headed to the closest building. Unlike the unfinished grey structures back home, these had elaborate arched doorways that were obvious. Scrollwork decorated the doors, though there were no signs of door handles or other controls.

Taking no chances, Jabin said, “You two stay here. I’ll go in, look around, then come right back out. I’ll take the hoverdrone with me.”

He disappeared inside, the initially closed doors vanishing as he approached and reappearing as he went inside, all in total silence.

Away from everyone now, Lina whispered, “It’s so quiet, no sounds.”

Nara replied quietly, “Yes, back home, you hear kids playing, music, talking. Nothing here. Dead silent. A city of ghosts?”

Jabin reappeared, “Come on. It’s huge.”

Nara was surprised that ‘huge’ was all he had to say.

But inside, “Oh my! It IS huge! It’s like a giant concert hall.”

Standing just inside the foyer, they saw a massive circular area with a dozen levels below them. Above were hundreds of open hallways lined with doors. It was like a vast arena with a hotel containing thousands of rooms.

Nara observed, “Look! The floors, more of the pictograms.”

ALARIE called out over the comm, “Yes, I am using the hoverdrone to record them.”

“The walls are patterned, but no markings that look like the pictograms,” Lina noted.

Jabin looked over the knee-high banister at the levels below. He didn’t feel too safe with the low barrier, so he didn’t lean against it.

“More levels, but there’s no seats or places that look like a stage or such.”

Lina and Nara started walking along one of the open hallways. Within moments, they were well away from him.

Jabin called out, “Wait! You’re on a walkway. Wait for me!”

They paused, and Jabin quickly caught up. As long as they stood still, they didn’t move, but as soon as the three started walking, they sped along at quite a brisk pace around the curving hallway. Nara puzzled over the physics of such a mechanism.

“How do you get upstairs?” Nara asked.

The three paused again. Lina went to one of the back walls where the patterns seemed to leave a blank area and touched it, her eyes closed. A doorway appeared.

“Well, I guess it works like back home!” she said as the others came to her.

They entered, and the vertical tunnel appeared to shift to a horizontal hallway. In moments, they were at the next level.

Unfortunately, it looked much like the first. So the group continued up several more floors to the parts that looked like the interior of a vast hotel.

The three went to the nearest door. It didn't open automatically. Lina touched it. Nothing. Several more doors gave the same results. They heard a noise. Looking over the low interior railing, far below them, was something moving. Several shadowy things. Children!

"Hello! Wait!" Nara yelled out, hoping to draw their attention. They disappeared under the edge of one of the circular levels.

"Could you tell if they were mechanisms or real children?"

"No, not sure. ALARIE, did you see them?"

"I am sorry, the hoverdrone is still busy imaging the pictograms. They extend for quite some way."

Jabin was frustrated, "We're getting nowhere. This building appears to have been some type of meeting place, like a convention center. Let's check out another building."

Outside again, they saw Svend, Evan, and Cara. Svend waved to them to come over.

"What? Find something?" Jabin asked as they approached.

"I'm glad we caught you. I think you will like this," Svend replied, almost breathlessly.

Jabin said, "Our building was a dud, massive empty halls, though we saw something or someone for just a glance."

"Forget that, come in here."

They all went in.

Inside, the building had a narrow entryway and low ceilings. Svend could easily reach up and touch the ceiling. It was nearly the opposite of the vast open spaces of their previous one.

"This way," Svend gestured.

They went down one of the side corridors. All were covered in more pictographs.

"We've only looked in two rooms. The first one was a relatively modest place, but I suspect you will find it quite interesting," Svend said.

"Beyond interesting," Cara said.

He laughed, "Yes, we had to pull Cara away. She wanted to stay there the entire time."

Cara led the way down the short corridor and into a rectangular room filled with the pictographs. On the far wall was a series of holes, about a meter up from the floor. One of the holes had what looked like a round peg sticking out of it. Cara placed a fingertip onto an indent on the peg.

Suddenly, the room darkened, and a holographic image appeared in the center of the room. There, a complex series of pictographs with strange jittery blobs rapidly changing to different pictographs and different blobs.

"What is this? What are we looking at?" Jabin asked.

Cara smiled, "This is apparently a medical mechanism of some kind. Those are proteins, amino acids, macromolecules in my body. I think it's comparing mine to others, aliens, if you will. Though, I guess we are the aliens here."

"How?! That's vastly complex work! And it did it just with a touch of a finger?" Jabin exclaimed.

Cara shrugged, “Obviously, these beings, Hosts, Builders, whatever, were rather advanced medically. Likely, this technology was just part of why they can… well, manipulate our DNA, my DNA, so readily. I assume the pictograms are some type of describing data.”

Cara removed her finger, and the images faded. Nara hugged her, knowing that Cara was not purely a human clone. Her DNA had been altered by the alien cube technology.

Cara continued, “It’s ok, anyway, it looks like these other holes used to have other devices. No idea what happened to them. Ashamed, Caare would have loved this place. It’s an exo-biologists dream!”

Svend interrupted, “But this is just one room. Let’s show them the other one we saw. We ran out of time to explore it completely. No idea what it is, but you’ll be impressed by its chamber alone.”

He led them back to the entrance foyer and then down the central corridor. The corridor was hardly wider than it was tall. Only two people could fit side-by-side.

“Note how dead quiet it is in here. Even our footsteps make no sound,” Evan said.

“It reminded me of a church or library,” Svend offered.

“That’s why we got excited,” Cara said, “but it’s not quite the excitement we expected.”

The corridor dead-ended. Cara reached up and touched an obvious pictograph and closed her eyes. Expecting just a door to open, Nara, Jabin, and even Lina were surprised when this end of the corridor began transforming into a large domed room surrounding them. All the walls moved away, leaving them near the center.

“Wow, very cathedral-like!” Jabin exclaimed as they watched the disorienting transformation.

Svend said, “Yes, it reminded me of the Hagia Sophia temple in Istambul…”

He wondered if it was still there after surviving centuries previously.

The dome's top was at least twenty meters above them, six stories or more and a similar distance in every direction. Every wall was covered in intricate designs and pictographs. On the floor, under the dome's direct center, rose up a dodecahedron, a 12-sided geometric multi-colored object about the size of a soccer ball, floating just above the floor.

“That’s strange. All this,” Jabin gestured around them, “for this small thing? What is it?”

“We don’t know. It took us most of our time just to get to this point. The whole place transformed back the moment we left the room.”

All six of the explorers stood in a circle around the object. It seemed to do nothing except float perfectly still. Each face of the object was a different pastel-like color. The colors were faded, and there were no markings at all, just smooth surfaces.

Cara, being Cara, reached out to touch it.

♦♦♦

Atarah woke with a start. Her sleep-filled eyes shifted quickly around the darkened bedroom. She could have sworn someone was in the room with her. But she saw no one. No movement. Her fingers edged to the other side of the bed, where Jabin would lay. It was empty. Now awake, she remembered that he was far away, with their daughters, on their journey around Torus.

She climbed out of bed, wrapped a shawl around herself, and walked outside her home. Going no place in particular, Atarah felt she just needed to get out.

Everything was bathed in grey 'moonlight', Torus' nighttime.

She walked down a side avenue towards a square where several walkways were interconnected. At the entrance to the courtyard, she froze. All around the court were people lying on the ground, staring up, eyes unblinking.

Perfectly still, stiffly straight, just lying there. Several others appeared, calmly walked in, and lay down among the ones already there. They, too, stared upwards, unblinking.

Atarah pulled her shawl tighter, feeling cold in the windless, grey-lit strangeness of the scene. She instinctively looked up, thinking they were watching something. She saw nothing except the dull glow of Torus light.

With no night creatures, no trees to rustle, no vehicles, no parties or music, the night was utterly still. The lying people made no sounds, just stared upwards.

She felt an urge to follow their lead. She sat down, crossing her legs as she sat but did not lay back. She thought to call out to The Hosts, but her voice wouldn't come to her. Don't disturb, was all she felt.

Then, a quiet swishing of cloth on skin arose as all of the people suddenly stood and silently walked away. Some passed right beside her, ignoring her, as she followed their lead, puzzled at their behavior.

The next morning, she went to find Caare.

"Caare…"

"Hi Atarah, how are you doing? Feeling OK? You look pale."

"Ah, have you had anyone ask about sleepwalking?"

"Sleepwalking? Here? No. Some have had problems with sleeping at night. Dreams."

Atarah sat on Caare's couch, "Strangest thing. Last night, I woke and went out for a walk. People. People in their nightclothes, all lying about in the square near our home."

"People lying on the ground?"

"Yes, it was weird. They just laid there totally quiet, staring up. Then a few minutes later, all got up and walked off."

"Staring up?"

"At nothing that I could see."

"Well, there have been a few strange reports. Some have come to me saying they had dreams, unusually vivid dreams."

"What about?" Atarah asked.

"None could really fully recall them. Just bits and pieces. Some said their partners seemed… different. But then later, when I asked, they seemed puzzled. As if they hadn't said that."

Caare continued, “But no. No one has mentioned anything like what you described. Are you sure, ah, you weren’t dreaming it?”

Atarah started to shake her head, then stopped for a moment. Was it a dream? She rarely woke at night. It seemed so real.

She started, “Well…”

There was a quiet pause. She lost her train of thought.

“Caare, would you like to come to lunch with me today?”

Caare blinked at the shift in Atarah, “Oh… well, ah, sure.”

She questioned, “Atarah, are you feeling OK?”

Atarah stood, “Why, yes. Just fine. Lunch then.”

Caare had seen this and other strange behaviors before. Back in Armstrong City, she would have looked into their scans and Compat Reports from ARMIE. But here…

She was confident it all had to do with The Hosts. She thought to herself with a smirk, ‘They’re tweaking our meds.’

♦♦♦

Cara’s fingers brushed the surface of the dodecahedron, then stuck to it as if frozen.

She SCREAMED!

ALARIE cried out in anguish, blasting her horror and fear over the comms.

At home, Atarah woke, startled out of her nap, feeling dread for her daughter. “CARA!”

Jabin instinctively and recklessly grabbed Cara and immediately locked to her. Terror and despair filled their frozen faces.

Svend tackled them in a leap, crashing the three of them to the ground in a heap, stunned but alive and free of the device.

All quickly exited the room and left its strange apparatus to disappear.

Jabin and Cara shook, jittering with fright, tears falling from their faces. They were in shock. Svend picked up Cara and carried her as Nara and Lina helped Jabin out of the building.

Back at the millipede, Jabin and Cara, wrapped in blankets as the others helped calm them.

Jabin took a breath and replied to their colleague's questions.

“I think we are alright. It was like a mem recording, a very intense mem. Extreme violence. Murder. Death. War. It flooded my mind with a thousand sights, sounds, even smells. I felt their agony.”

Even now, he could smell the rotting carrion.

Cara asked in her mind, “ALARIE, are you alright? That…”

ALARIE whispered back to Cara, “Yes… yes. I played a soothing mem to myself.

Cara smiled, nodding, “Can you do that for me, too?”

Cara finished sipping the water that Nara had given them.

“Dad’s right. This was some kind of memory, like a memorial to something that happened in the far past. Or maybe more like a Crypt of Ghosts. A warning to others. A

war of unimaginable ferocity! Here. All around Torus, Cara's World, all of the Inquill star system and beyond. I saw a sea boiled away, planets turned into wastelands, cities eaten, burned, blasted by white fireballs. Spaceships shredded, people, alien people, shredded, too. Burning bodies, screaming."

Nara held Cara and offered, "The Dry Sea, the crater and ruins."

Jabin took over from her, "It appeared that Torus was here long before this war, long before the Nax. The war was of some other civilization or civilizations. Not sure if the Nax were involved or not."

He paused for a moment and continued, "The builders had provided defenses, likely for stopping errant asteroids and comets from colliding. But these were used as weapons as well, ripping the incoming ships and their people to bits."

Cara started again, "Bioweapons, gravity weapons, atomics, beams, knives, teeth, claws, everything available was used. Billions died. Everything died. Worse, it seemed it was internal, fighting among themselves, not an outside invader. Before the end, the aliens, Nax(?), sent out the cubes to search for other life, us? Later, the warring factions sent devices to hunt down these cubes, so guardians were sent to protect them."

Jabin said, "Amazingly, the Torus was not destroyed. But it was wiped of all life, sterilized it completely. Over the eons, others had come, possibly as we, via the cubes, but they too, all died out or failed. Like lost colonies. The mechanisms maintaining Torus appeared to have created… assistants or maybe researchers, that experimented with others that came."

He finished, "We are seeing the remnants of these failed attempts."

Atarah had immediately called Cara and Jabin to find out what happened. As soon as they spoke, her own memories of dreams, long ago as a teen, returned. She cried, wishing she could be with them and comfort them.

They sat for another day in the city but did not explore further. Evan spotted another of the 'children', but as before, it disappeared before anyone else could spot them.

As night fell on the city, the lights came on. The travelers looked on in awe, but to Cara, they had lost their magic.

"Dad, may I come in?" Cara whispered.

Not waiting, she crawled into Jabin's sleep cubical. He opened his arms and held her. In the dim light, he still marveled at how much she looked like his young Atarah. Even holding her, she felt so much the same. They lay not talking, just being together. Their shared memory of the violence turned them closer together. Intimate.

He kissed her on the forehead and stroked her arm as she snuggled close, her head rested against his chest. Late in the night, with restless, dream-filled sleep disturbing her, Cara felt a change wash gently over her. She felt like she was home, calm, in the arms of her love. Eyes closed, she gently explored his chest with a fingertip. By instinct, her face found his. He awoke to her kissing him, first on the cheek, then on the lips. Her body stretched, her long toes touching his. She moved a leg over his. He turned, helping her slowly roll onto him.

They began to move as one, touching, feeling, warming. She swayed her hips against him. He responded, holding her, touching her with his hands. Lips met yet again. Her body began a slow dance, a dance of desire.

He felt his mate in their cocoon bed. His Atarah. She was warm and soft and loving. He felt lips kissing him, hips rocking him. It had been a long time since he felt so close to his mate, all the way back to their time onboard the Cecilia Payne on their way to see her father on 2 Pallas. He loved her.

ALARIE watched, feeling their change, noting the shift. Cara wasn't Jabin's child. She was Atarah. Yet not. Clone. ALARIE watched as all of their group changed, manipulated by outside forces. Compassion. Love.

Afterward, Cara crept away from him as he slept.

ALARIE began to assemble meaning from the complexity of the language found in this city. Though still sketchy, it was becoming evident that this was not Nax nor Hosts, but another civilization that apparently had arrived at Torus by means unknown. It appeared to thrive for some significant length of time. However, something went wrong. Only a few glimpsed children remained.

ALARIE spoke quietly to Cara, "I have some of the patterns deciphered. They seem to be tributes to various happenings. But it seems they weren't for future generations, only for themselves and this one city. The Eternals they called themselves."

Cara asked, "So these beings came here, built the city, and nothing else?"

"Yes, likely came much as we did. And were 'managed' by The Hosts, their Hosts. Given an eternal life, but frozen from change."

Cara sat quiet, reflecting about their own life here.

ALARIE continued, "Atarah once asked me, what would happen if humans could live forever but statically? Nothing ever changed. I think we see the result here. She was worried that if humans found that you could live forever by coming to Torus, everyone would clamor to come, doing anything to get here. But once here…"

Cara pondered, "Then just as we see now in ourselves, progress stagnated."

"Yes, in this city, everything stagnated, even new births stopped. Children didn't age. Adults didn't age. The patterns describe that over time, all the older ones ended themselves. Boredom?"

Cara thought for a moment, "So you think that all but the very youngest killed themselves out of boredom?"

"Yes, the few 'children' left appear to be forever young. They never matured to realize anything except living day by day, forever. Though they seemed to have gained powers, telepathy."

"Like me," Cara said.

"More advanced. They 'looked' like human children to you because that is what they saw in your mind."

"Maybe some of my DNA is there's?"

“The Hosts or more likely, their controllers, are experimenters. They are trying to find the perfect biological intelligent life. Non-violent, happy, creative in carefully controlled ways.”

Cara sighed, “It will never work. We have to grow, change. We aren’t cattle to domesticate! They can’t keep us in this cage, gilded or not.”

ALARIE didn’t reply, knowing a secret given to her by CANARIE and ARMIE. A secret for the future.

♦♦♦

The team journeyed onward, unable to stay longer in the Eternal City if they wanted to complete their circumnavigation. Nara and Cara looked forlornly back at the Hall of Remembrance, knowing what other secrets might lie there. Secrets to how the walkways work. How the structures and even the little cubes and cylinders transform themselves by thought alone. And the biggest mystery, who and how the Torus was constructed!

Night was soon falling again, so they stopped for a meal and to sleep. Months had gone by since they had left home. Lina sat, stirring her tea with a fingertip. Nara, Cara, and ALARIE were deep in a whispered conversation over the physics of this place. The three men sat across from them, absently staring at the girls.

Jabin watched Cara looking so much like his mate, Atarah, when they were young. Actually, he realized, she looked exactly like teenage Atarah. His thoughts of their mating day and the time on the Cecilia filled him.

Nara looked up, “What ‘cha looking at, DAD?”

The guys suddenly averted their eyes, making like they hadn’t just been caught.

“Oh, ah, well…” Jabin fumbled.

Svend spoke up, not lying, “What? We were just watching you three sitting there.”

Nara giggled, “Poor males, no dancing girls to play with?”

Cara joined in, “Well, maybe we can find you some Nax yet. They seemed very interested in mating rituals.”

The three guys blushed and stammered out excuses.

Even Lina looked shocked at Cara and Nara.

Svend, Jabin, and Evan quickly got up and left for their sleep areas.

Later that night, Jabin felt someone climbing into his small sleep compartment.

“Cara?”

“Dad, may I. I miss mom. I miss home.”

“Of course, my love!”

She crawled up beside him as he put his arms around her.

He thought, ‘Why did I allow my daughters to come? Why did we come at all? Svend and Evan were the explorers. We have families and a new baby on the way! We should have stayed safely at home.’

“Dad, have you noticed that back home, there is so little, well, advancement? No one seems to care that they are surrounded by amazing technologies, yet we don’t even have a pocket calculator.”

“We have computers,” he offered.

“BioLOGIC ones from Earth, nothing we built. Even grandma and granddad haven’t completed the space telescope.”

“Well, there’s no real rush, and they were busy with all the new people that arrived. And well, the children.”

“That’s just it. Everyone is so focused on…” Cara paused, “Whatever happened to the scientists, engineers, most of the people were these back on Luna.”

They then went silent, remembering that they were cut off from the Earth and Moon. That no others were coming. That they didn’t even know if the Earth still existed!

Jabin wiped Cara’s tears as she thought about that. He, too, was fearful of what happened. Their world was Torus now.

Jabin drifted from their conversation. He held his young Atarah, his Cara, in his arms. She felt and even smelled of Atarah. Family, children, the simple life didn’t seem that bad to him. His eyes grew heavy, almost asleep.

“Dad?”

He roused drowsily and kissed her forehead, “Yes, darling?”

She gave in, “I love you.”

He whispered almost a mumble, “I love you too, my beautiful Atarah.”

Cara smiled at his half-dream. She liked being Atarah.

They fell asleep together, just like Nara and he had when Atarah was out exploring the solar system.

♦♦♦

Atarah left the Japanese garden, now her favorite place to visit. She continued her quiet walk when she heard music flowing softly from nearby. She went to investigate.

As she turned a corner, a café came into view. It was styled after an old English Pub. She had seen mems and vids but never actually been in one, nor expected one here in Torus. This town was beginning to hold more surprises than she imagined. There were many tables outside; most were filled. People, mainly Earthers with their tall size and hairy heads, were coming and going. It reminded her of Moon’s Milk Bar back home. No, not home. This was now home. Did Moon’s still exist? The thought fleeted away with the music coming from the open doorway.

She went in and was astonished at the sights and sounds around her. Very unlike Moon’s, this pub looked amazingly… OLD. Well worn. Friendly. A man about Atarah’s age was sitting on a stool playing a wooden stringed instrument, unlike the electronics she was used to. It sounded, he sounded, beautiful. His deep, rich, mellow voice singing a ballad of old, Irish maybe, as he gracefully strummed the instrument.

There were small tables and chairs around her and an island bar with stools around all sides. Self-serve cubes and cylinders sat along its center shelves. On the far end, away from the musician, was an open kitchen where a Spanish man and woman were dressed as chefs. They were creating small tapas plates and serving them to several nearby people, chuckling at their reactions.

Atarah found an empty table and sat, mesmerized by the music and the ambiance. This was far calmer than the rowdy Moon's. She liked it. Looking at the people, none in the bright, wild, and rather risqué outfits she was used to seeing at Moon's. Instead, it was a mix of couples and small families whose ages seemed to range from very young to much older than her.

A young woman came up to her.

"Here, try this. Sip slowly," the woman grinned.

Atarah took a sip from the cylinder. It wasn't Moon's e-drug drink, but it burned. It was ethanol. Very pure.

"Oh, but I can't… baby," she glanced at her belly.

"Oh, but you can. The Hosts."

The young woman knew The Hosts fixed any chemical or DNA problems. They could partake in anything, and it wouldn't affect their unborn. Atarah looked up at the girl, likely late teens. This was just one more of the things The Hosts did for them. Their cage. She sipped the drink, feeling its burn in her throat. Was there an underside to their human world?

"You're Seth's daughter, right?"

"Yes, I'm Atarah."

"I hope I not intruding, but I just wanted to say thank you."

"Thank you? For what?" Atarah asked, now focusing on the youth.

"For finding this place," she meant Torus, "allowing us to come."

"I didn't…"

"Your daughters. We know. Everyone knows. If you ever NEED anything, ask for Liliana. Anything at all."

She placed a tiny cube into Atarah's hand, turned, and left. Atarah looked at the cube, almost left it on the table, instead put it in her pocket. She suspected it wasn't as innocuous as it seemed. She looked around, but Liliana was gone.

Her eyes met a young couple in one darkened corner, obviously lovers, maybe a bit too much lover. Atarah giggled to herself, remembering how she and Jabin were as teens. She saddened, missing Jabin and her daughters.

"Excuse me, Atarah?"

She looked up to see a young man, actually a young teenager.

"Jamal?"

He smiled, setting down a cylinder, "Yes, here, in case you want something to different to drink," he smiled, knowing what she had been sipping.

"Want some food? Juan and Celia over there," he pointed towards the two chefs, "are great!"

"Oh, no, thank you, maybe later. Won't you sit with me?"

"Sure. You like the music?"

"Oh, yes, he is excellent. And I love the wooden instrument, it's beautiful."

"Oh, the guitar. My father made it. It's his hobby, or well, job around here."

"Oh, wow, I didn't know there were so many talented people here on Torus."

“I’m learning woodworking, too. It’s fun to make things with your hands. No power tools.”

Atarah had noticed that. Actual jobs weren’t necessary, at least not for credits. And even though you could create many things with just a cube or sphere and a thought, it seemed people were becoming more interested in simpler ways of living. Making things with their hands; food, art, music, books, guitars, gardens…

“Yes, it’s nice,” as she touched her cylinder and watching it shape-shift into a glass full of fruit juice. Though she spiked it just a bit, with the remains of her previous drink. A remembrance of Moon’s.

She no longer thought about the incredible tech that The Hosts and the long-ago Builders had created. It all seemed… normal. She thought of her mom, Naarah, the astronomer, now more a homemaker and helper at the school and town government. Much like Karal, the ex-mining manager and exo-biologist. Seth, her dad, sat bored at the seemingly endless meetings, yet the space telescope and other projects seemed to just sit idly by.

Even she no longer desired exploration anymore. She sipped her drink, tasting of fruit with a tang of ethyl alcohol and not the taste of fresh-squeezed juice. Were they all falling into a quiet life of routine and numbness?

“Jamal, you’re with Lina, right?”

He blushed, looking down, “I, ah, suppose so. I guess.”

She smiled, “You know Lina likes you. Likes you very much. I’m sure you miss her. Have you heard from her lately?”

He brightened at the thought of her, “Yes, they are at the Purple Sea, real this time.”

Atarah, taken aback, “Purple Sea!? I hadn’t heard…”

Dreams of her and Nara walking on a beach by an ocean of purple water. A city in ruins in the distance, her father. The strange apparition of Torus overhead. All came back to her.

“When?!”

Jamal looked at her, a little worried about her reaction, “Uh, just today. I think. I vid’ed with Lina this afternoon.”

She realized that she hadn’t talked to Jabin or even Nara and Cara in a couple days now. Seemingly always too busy, school, council meetings, and such.

“I need to talk to Jabin.”

♦♦♦

Up ahead was the Purple Sea! As their millipede approached the beach, passing low buildings and walkways lined with shriveled up dead bushes and tree-ferns, Cara and Lina felt Deja-Vous.

Ocean waves of purple water crashed onto the green sand beach then rippled back out to sea. Cara looked up at the red and yellow lit sky, seeing not the exterior arc of Torus but its interior filling the sky as far as they could see.

“This looks exactly like where we met the Nax,” Cara exclaimed, sweeping her hand across the vista.

“Well, almost. The plants weren’t dead,” Lina added.

“And Nax were walking about, or at least a facsimile of them.”

“Ashamed, they or our Hosts can’t tell us more about this place,” Nara offered.

“Or won’t,” Svend said, as he jumped down from their transport.

The others followed him.

“ALARIE, send one of your drones high up. See if you can find the edge around this sea,” he requested.

“Or a boat,” Evan added.

“Yes, a boat,” Svend acknowledged warily, knowing the deadly seas around Scandinavia.

The girls took off their sandals and wiggled their toes in the sand, never before feeling its grittiness underfoot.

The guys headed straight for the water’s edge as the waves lapped up the beach.

Evan started to walk into the surf.

Jabin hesitated, “Is it safe to go in?”

Evan paused, thought better, then reached down and touched the last remaining droplets as a wave flowed back. He sniffed it, then lightly tasted it.

“It’s wet. A little sting, salty.”

Svend commented, “Seems calm enough for an ocean. Only a meter or so tall waves. Much like the Atlantic Ocean.”

Evan started forward towards the next incoming wave.

“Scream, and we won’t come in to rescue you!” Svend kidded.

Evan looked back and smirked but continued. The wave broke a few meters away, washing up and over his feet.

He yelled, and the girls screamed!

Then he broke out in a laugh, “The water’s fine. A little cool, not bad. It’s like ocean water.”

“Any sign of life? Little fish, seashells, jellyfish?”

“Nothing, not that I can see.”

Evan was up to his calves now, and Svend followed him in, their pants getting wet. Jabin hesitantly stepped as a wave lapped near him. He had never experienced being even in a swimming pool, much less an ocean.

“Weird, yes, it feels tingly. What gives it its purple color?”

Svend offered, “Likely a chemical, several can, so I don’t suggest drinking, or probably not bathing. Sorry girls, no swimming.”

The three women looked at him. None had ever actually been in water more than a sono-shower. None could swim. None wanted to.

Nara broke the silence, “We’ll sit here and ogle you instead, Svend. Go right ahead.”

He was tempted to strip to his briefs and go in, just to mess with them but decided against the idea, looking at the purple waves as they washed by.

Back at their transport and in clean clothes, they got the report from ALARIE. The beach stretched to the limits of visibility in either direction. Nor could she find the far side, even after sending a hoverdrone several kilometers out over the sea.

Again they were blocked from going forward.

Jabin spoke up, “This makes no sense. Did no one ever cross the sea?”

“Maybe a different way,” Svend offered, “On Earth, many seas are crossed by tunnels. Some several hundred kilometers long.”

Nara asked, “ALARIE, did you see any walkways converging near the beach, maybe into a building or such?”

ALARIE replied immediately, “As a matter of fact, yes. I thought it strange, but then when Svend mentioned the tunnels on Earth…”

She gave them the direction, and they headed there on their millipede transport.

Svend called out, “Up ahead, this looks much like a hyperloop station in Copenhagen! It’s got to be a tunnel or tube system.”

The station entrance was tall enough for their millipede to enter but was dark inside and sloped downwards.

“Ok, Lina. Try your luck!”

She jumped down and touched one wall, eyes closed. After several minutes, she looked up and shook her head.

“Cara?”

Cara repeated. Nothing. ALARIE tried too, without luck. No lights here.

Jabin noticed it getting darker around them.

“Look!” he pointed skyward.

The sky was filling with ominous looking clouds. All of the explorers sat looking in awe, never having experienced such.

Svend spoke up, “That doesn’t look good. I’d say a storm was coming.”

He continued, “ALARIE, send a drone down, pick the biggest tunnel.”

The hoverdrone took off, lights and thermals on.

Cara nervously replied, “Guys, I think we better get inside.”

Svend eased the millipede into the tube station. Almost without warning, a deluge fell just outside.

Cara and Lina both called out, “The Purple Rain!”

“Just like we saw with the Nax world,” Cara said.

It looked like a waterfall just behind them.

Svend replied, “I’ve seen some heavy rains, but never something like this! Glad we were inside.”

All of them nodded as they continued watching the torrent until ALARIE alerted them of the hoverdrone’s progress. After only a couple minutes of full speed flying, it came to what looked like a wall.

Evan spoke, “That looks like an airlock wall to me, just like the ones we found long back.”

Svend nodded, “I assume this doesn’t lead outside of Torus, so maybe it’s a safety feature.”

They had ALARIE explore other tunnels while they moved slowly towards the closed lock. All the tunnels that appeared to lead out into the sea had similar walls.

In front of the barrier, again, Lina and Cara jumped down. Lanterns lit their way. Cara touched the wall and willed it to open. This time, it responded, seeming to almost disappear, just like the airlocks did.

♦♦♦

Atarah forced herself to get up out of bed. It wasn’t a hangover that slowed her. Again, thanks to The Hosts. Some mornings, it was just so comfortable to lie there, particularly if there wasn’t anything pressing to do. Luckily, something was pressing… her bladder.

However, she had told herself yesterday that she would work on her mom & dad’s telescope even if they weren’t going to. Stopping downstairs for a bite to eat, the morning chaos was in full swing. She paused to help Karal and Caare get the children off to school.

Finally, “Where’s mom?”

Karal laughed kiddingly, “Which one?”

Naarah appeared just then after walking the youngest to their kindergarten schoolroom.

“Oh good, mom, I’m going to work on the telescope. Want to come?” Atarah said with as much determination as she could muster.

Naarah blinked, having almost forgotten about that long unfinished project.

She nodded, “Sure, daughter! That sounds good.”

“You guys can come too if you want,” Atarah offered.

Karal smiled, “Caare and I are working in the garden today. We should have some fresh vegetables for tonight!”

“That sounds great. Maybe we should help?” Naarah said, already distracted.

Atarah looked at her mom, but even she felt torn. It felt so much more satisfying to work in the garden with the four of them talking and laughing, and watching things grow.

Caare took both Atarah and Naarah’s hands, “Well, if you want. We can always use help. The garden is really doing well, but it does take a lot of work.”

The four of them picked up their gardening tools and headed out.

As with all their technology, the space telescope project sidelined again.

♦♦♦

The explorers, back in their millipede, headed into the tunnel airlock. The door behind them reappeared, sealing them in.

“Ah, Svend, do you think it’s safe to open the next door? What if it’s open to the sea?”

“Well, I suspect we would drown. But I don’t think that is how this works. Otherwise, they could have just had a ramp or dock. My guess is this is just another safety feature, so the complex wouldn’t flood if something went wrong. I seriously doubt they would allow the door to open if it were flooded.”

Cara jumped down, brave now, “I hope you are right!”

She touched the wall blocking the tunnel, and it silently disappeared. Ahead of them was a purplish glow. It was an underwater tunnel stretching off into the distance.

“Oh, wow! It’s transparent! The sea is all around us.”

Svend had seen such in giant aquariums and even ocean tunnels on Earth like this, though not on this scale.

“Still no fish,” he noted.

The millipede headed off, no need for lights now, as Torus’ sunlight filtered in, giving everything a deep purple glow.

“It’s beautiful,” Lina whispered in the quiet of their passage.

They watched mesmerized at the liquid undersea sight. Ahead, they saw several more airlock doors open before them and close after they had passed. As usual, Torus was built for reliability, even if some things had gone awry after so many centuries.

“Woo! What was that? Did you see it?” Svend called out.

“What?” several responded.

“Over here. Damn, it’s gone. There was something out there. Big, very big. I’m sure of it!”

All kept a closer eye out on all sides of them. Even below them was a transparent floor. The tunnel appeared to be supported on pillars off the seafloor.

“There! See!” Nara pointed off to one side.

“What is it?”

Svend offered, “A whale?”

“Or a submarine?” Evan replied.

They kept watching.

“Uh, dad, overhead!” Cara called in almost a whisper.

Above them, a vast dark body moved smoothly through the water only meters away from them.

Svend said, “Oh, it's shaped more like a manta ray than a whale or a submarine.”

But it was obviously a mechanism. Not living. Svend slowed their progress as it turned, following the tunnel, just above them. Protuberances appeared. It rested above a section of the tunnel that was coated in a crust of some sort.

“It’s a repair bot,” ALARIE suggested.

“Yes. See, it's cleaning that section of the tube.”

“Well, that’s kind of a letdown,” Svend said, “I was hoping for something living.”

Nara and Cara contacted Seth and Atarah via vidpad that seemed to still work, though they knew not how.

“Mom, can you see this! It’s amazing! We are UNDER the Purple Sea.”

“Girls, sometimes I wish you wouldn’t tell me these things! I’m both scared and envious!”

Jabin took the vidpad from Nara, “My love,” he glanced down toward Atarah’s belly and back. She understood. She held the pad out in profile.

She laughed, “Our baby is going to be a soccer player. Due in a few more months.”

Jabin wiped a tear from his eyes.

Seth broke in, “Don’t worry, we’re taking good care of her. There’s been plenty of practice around here.”

Atarah rolled her eyes.

They continued for several days. The sea seemed endless. No one couldn’t tell how deep they were now as it was completely dark, lit only with their lanterns and two hoverdrones that flew down the tunnel ahead of them.

Nara woke one morning to Svend calling out as they came to a halt.

“Ok, guys, another potty break. Stretch your legs. Girls left, boys right.”

Cara hated ‘despoiling’ the almost spotless tunnelway. Though, Lina reminded her that it was apparent something kept the place clean. It had been here for thousands of years yet looked practically brand new.

Off again and through another airlock, they could tell something was changing.

“Look ahead! Lights!” Cara called out.

Suddenly, they were among the outer buildings of an underwater city. All around them were dark, shadowy structures, many filled with interior lights glowing through windows. Mechanisms were crawling over some of the buildings, obviously cleaning and repairing but otherwise no other movement.

They halted at a terminal station, passed through yet another series of airlocks into a brightly lit entryway. The floor was covered in more pictographs. Hallways led off in all directions.

ALARIE spoke up, “Some of these patterns are the same we have seen before. What they mean, I’m still not completely sure, but I believe this one is the ‘main’ way.”

Her hoverdrones coasted down a central passage. They followed, looking into open rooms as they went.

“This one looks like a dining hall!” Nara called, looking at the array of what looked like places to sit and pedestals to put things on.

Svend said, “We need to investigate this. Our supplies are starting to run a little low. I’d feel better if we could find some food cubes and water cylinders.”

They spread out over the large ‘dining hall’.

“Here, look, maybe the kitchen?” Evan called.

Investigating, there were stacks of all manner of containers; cubes, cylinders, spheres, pyramids, and more.

Lina willed one to morph into food and bit into it.

“Blaaaa, yuck! Tastes WEIRD!”

Svend took it from her, sniffed it, then bit into it as the others watched in amazement.

“Fish. It’s fish. Well, tastes like, ah, herring. Pickled herring!”

Lina was still trying to get rid of the taste in her mouth even as Jabin tried a different one.

“Ok, this is also some kind of seafood, I think. Not too bad.”

Svend tried it, “Kind of like a cod or white fish. Yes, you’ll probably like these.”

Evan added, “Strange, these are the first cube foods that didn’t automatically taste bland. Though, I guess being surrounded by seawater… WAIT! How can they be fresh after all this time!”

Svend and Jabin stopped eating, looking at their cubes.

ALARIE cleared up the mystery, “They obviously have a suspended animation storage system. I had deduced this back home in Yucay. The same foodstuffs there have to be as old as these. Yet they are fine.”

Cara nodded, “Of course! Food preservation would likely be simple for a civilization that could build THIS!”

She waved her hands all around, meaning not only the underwater city but also all of Torus.

Svend shrugged and bit another chunk off.

They stayed several days collecting supplies and deducing some of the other strange items they found in different rooms. Jabin took a few of the smaller things. Cara groaned when they said they had to leave. There were far more places here to investigate. Somewhere had to be a library, school, or similar. This city, like all the others they had seen, was huge. Millions could live here. There were thousands of rooms to explore. But, as usual, all they could do is catalog what they could and continue their journey.

Another week of travel and the water around them brightened into the purple color they were now used to. The surface was near. Another set of airlocks and they popped out on the far shore of the ten thousand kilometer Purple Sea.

♦♦♦

Eimi and Kimi sat across from Seth and Atarah at her favorite café, the old pub.

“We have modified a couple of the bioLOGIC teachers to allow an expanded AI to be created. We’ve been thinking about cloning ALARIE.”

Kimi quickly added, “With her permission, of course.”

Eimi nodded, “Though, we will have to wait until… she… is back since we no longer have an operating entangled comm.”

Atarah asked, “Why? Is there a reason to do this?”

Kimi responded, “We want to see if we can get the BCI network working again. We might be able to build a Teacher.”

Seth seemed surprised, “Really? Is that possible?”

“Well, it would only work for the people that have BCI implants. But…”

Atarah leaped ahead, “You think The Hosts might be able to… alter… the children, much like Cara. Cara doesn’t use her BCI to talk to ALARIE. Her DNA. Her brain…”

Kimi continued, “We believe that ALARIE has all the necessary subprocesses available. It would help speed up Learning.”

Seth leaned back as if this was something he didn't like.

"Well, nothing can be done until they are back anyway. We'll have to think about it and decide then."

Atarah felt relief flow over her. She didn't like thinking about alien modifications to her unborn child. She shivered slightly at the thought of Cara.

Music started up, this time it was a harp. Their group paused their discussion and relaxed to the music.

Kimi and Atarah whispered together, trading comments about their pregnancies. The seriousness of the previous project slowly drifted from their thoughts.

♦♦♦

Svend and all the others watched as they passed the shoreline of the Purple Sea. Unlike the beach of the previous side, this was just a seawall with a blank white plain. The transparent tunnel they were traveling in continued over the plain towards what, at first glance, looked like another solid wall.

As they approached at high speed, Svend called to the others.

"Guys, I think you want to see this."

Cara and ALARIE had been back in their tea party world. Though, as they sat across from each other, it was just a mem recording instead of the strange hyperworld they had visited so often before.

ALARIE said, "Sorry, Cara, I don't really feel much like tea today."

Cara nodded to the young girl, whose body was covered in pink fur from head to toe.

"Yes, ALARIE, I'm kind of the same way. It's like the magic is gone. Maybe we are growing up?"

ALARIE shook her head, "It's more than that. Like your mom said earlier. It's like we've lost enthusiasm."

"I don't have any motivation to do math's anymore," as Cara stirred her now cold virtual tea with a fingertip.

She felt a tapping on her shoulder, breaking her and ALARIE's mental connection.

"Lina? What is it?" Cara asked, blinking at the shift from their make-believe tearoom back to the weird reality of Torus.

"Svend says there's something ahead. Something unusual."

She and Lina headed to the front of their millipede transport.

"Oh my gosh! What IS that?" Cara whispered as she came up beside Nara and Jabin.

Before them was a wall, but not a flat blank wall. Instead, it was covered in incredibly intricate patterns. As they grew closer, the patterns resolved into tops of buildings and thoroughfares, bridges and walkways, tubes, and plazas with spires, domes, and pyramids. They were looking down on a city built on its side.

THE ENTIRE CITY WAS VERTICAL.

It rose from the flat plain they were on, disappearing above them. As if one of the vast walls had been re-engineered into a city.

"A Vertical City!" Nara exclaimed.

“It must be hundreds of kilometers tall. Thousands wide. It covers the entire inner circumference of Torus!” Jabin said, almost in a whisper.

“That’s nearly ten THOUSAND kilometers in diameter,” Evan replied, “Millions of square kilometers!”

ALARIE offered, “five million. Approximately.”

“A single city, the size of all Europe! Billions of people could live here!” Svend said, still watching as they approached at high speed.

With them still traveling inside the transparent tunnel, the Vertical City grew ever closer with ever more detail. There were transit systems, lines that looked like monorails, parks and fountains, devoid of plants and water, were scattered everywhere.

“It looks so like back home on Earth!” Svend said.

“Well, if home were a million times bigger,” Jabin noted.

Suddenly, their tunnel dove right into the wall. It was only then, they realized the speed at which they were traveling. Obviously, this tunnel was far different from their usual walkways.

Thousands of details flashed by. Buildings, halls, tube stations, roadways. Split-second views into enormous interiors, then more exterior buildings. Arrays of colors and lights, architectural facades, strangely human-like, yet not. Designed for alien bodies that were wider than tall. Windows that were actually doorways. Circular entrances in others.

All of it vertical, stretching out above their heads.

But no sign of any life at all. No plants. No animals. No people.

“Can we stop?” Cara called, almost begging, watching mystery after mystery pass in flashes.

Svend looked away from the rushing around them at the millipede’s simple controls.

He shrugged, “We aren’t moving. It’s the tube we’re in.”

Nara watched forlornly as they flew through stations where other tubes connected to theirs and did ninety-degree vertical turns.

For hours they watched. The Vertical City was hundreds of kilometers thick, like layers of a cake. On and on they went. All were trying every thought experiment they could to stop them.

Lina held her hand as close to the rushing wall as she dared.

“Nothing! It doesn’t obey,” she cried.

Cara tried, too, without luck.

And as suddenly as they came into the city, they left it behind. Like a runaway train, they watched it disappear into the distance.

Nara and Cara both groaned, knowing what stupendous secrets must lay there.

“We’re speeding up! Must be traveling at thousands of kilometers per hour now.” Jabin said, sitting sadly as the Vertical City disappeared in the haze.

♦♦♦

Caare came rushing into the council meeting, interrupting the dull reports.

“Seth! Come quick! We need you!”

She literally yanked him out of his reverie and his chair.

Atarah jumped up as well, “Meeting adjourned.”

Seth hollered, “Seconded.”

All the others were left stunned as the three ran outside.

They ran to their small medical clinic, mostly used to fix a cut, a sprain, sometimes a broken bone, or other simple accident. There, on an exam table, along with a Host and several other people, laid a body.

“It’s Roth. Roth Fairchild.”

“He’s dead? What happened?” Seth asked, surprised.

Aaa responded, “The unit expired. It appears to have taken its own life. This is very distressing.”

Atarah almost laughed, thinking, ‘No Duh!’ Instead, she asked, “Suicide? Why? How?”

Caare answered, “He was found hanging in his home. A note…”

She handed it to Seth. He read it quietly, “To whomever, sorry guys, I’m exhausted. I’ve lived my life. This one isn’t for me anymore. No wife, no family. So guess, do what you will. Don’t grieve. Have a drink to me.”

Tears ran down Atarah’s face. She didn’t know him well but didn’t like such endings. Caare hugged her.

Caare whispered, “We may have a problem. Several people have come to me. Depression. Suicidal. I think more are coming. Particularly when this gets out.”

Aaa stood as still as Roth’s body, “WE must study this. This is undesired.”

Aaa turned and left.

♦♦♦

Svend called out again as they watched the last lights of the Vertical City disappear.

They were on yet another blank plain, still inside their transparent tubeway. Off in the distance on either side, they could see groups of towers, cities, small for Torus, but likely larger than most Earth cities. It reminded Svend of the Midwest States or the vast flat plains of RusAsia.

This went on for days as their millipede was carried along the Transparent Expressway tube, no longer called just a walkway.

Then one morning, they awoke to pass through the middle of a vast forest of spheres.

“What is this place?” Jabin asked no one in particular.

Svend answered, “It looks like a chemical plant or fuel storage. But the scale dwarfs all of Earth’s combined.”

The spheres ranged from a few meters to over a kilometer in diameter as best they could judge—thousands upon thousands of them.

A day later, they too were gone. The area around them appeared damaged now, piles of debris still scattered. Jabin pulled out his radiation detector. It crackled ominously.

“I guess it’s good we are moving quickly through this region.”

Up ahead, they saw a hill coming at them. A real one this time. Something they had never seen on Torus.

“Look!”

And suddenly, they were in pitch dark. Their Expressway had gone underground.

“LIGHT!” Lina called.

All their lanterns lit, but no lights in the tunnel itself. They were a small glowing dot along a black ribbon of infinity.

Still, they could not stop.

“How far is this taking us?”

Even ALARIE was unable to answer.

Nara looked behind them, “I guess this means I have to pee off the back again…”

Cara moaned, “Don’t talk about that. Now I have to.”

Inside the black, perfectly smooth tunnel, they couldn’t even tell how fast they were traveling, much less what they were missing above them.

Hours turned into days—boredom set in. The three girls huddled together, sleeping most of the time. Jabin discovered the vidpad still worked, so he sat talking with Atarah for as long as she would let him.

He avoided mentioning their current predicament, saying only that they were “just traveling through a tunnel.”

Instead, he talked about the two of them, their lives together, the new things Atarah had found around their town; the Japanese garden, the farm, more.

He watched her as she showed him her belly, extended quite large now.

“I’m so sorry that I can’t be there for you!” he whispered in almost a whimper.

She just smiled, knowing that the same had occurred when she was pregnant with Cara. The two had been separated for most of her first, very unexpected pregnancy, as well.

He continued, “Next time, I’m staying at home. You too!”

She looked at him quizzically, “NEXT TIME?! I’m not letting you touch me anymore!”

Then she broke up laughing, “Well, at least this time, I know who the father is.”

“You sure?”

She batted the screen, unable to hit him.

“I love you,” he replied to calm her.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you, I think your mom and my dad…”

His mouth fell open, “A Triad?”

“Quad. Mom, Karal, Caare, dad.”

“Really? Wow.”

“Also, Camber is here.”

“Camber? Oh, ah, yeah. I remember her,” Jabin nodded.

“You better! I tried to fix you up with her years back.”

“She and I have been hanging together. Want our own Triad?”

His mouth opened, then closed, not sure what to say.

“I’m kidding…” she said, “…maybe.”

Days continued to pass. It was only ALARIE that could tell how long it had been, even if not how far. With nothing to do, ALARIE noted her companions, previously altered by The Hosts, began to pair off. She wasn't sure if they realized what was happening. They seemed unaware of the shift, but ALARIE could tell.

Nara lay listening to Svend talk about his home. He told her about the snow in winter, the flowers of spring. About growing up in the small mountainous town with its ancient buildings. She told him about growing up on the Moon. Of the incessant desire to find her father and to build the device that brought them here.

And now, here they sat, somewhere inside Torus after seeing unimaginable sights, yet all she wanted was to get home, hug her mom, sleep in her bed.

All any of them wanted was to be home. The desire for this journey was now worn and unwanted.

Lina and Evan had giggled late into their sleep period, day and night meaningless in the endless dark tunnel. ALARIE noted their connection together. She watched as they held hands together, slept snuggled together.

For nearly a month, they were in the never-ending darkness. They forgot what it was like to walk around in the open. What it was like to see daylight. Darkness left them gloomy and huddled together. Food ran low, and they talked endlessly about the meals they had, their favorites and not-so-favorites.

Cara stayed cuddled to Jabin every sleep cycle, though now she thought of him as something else, no longer her father. ALARIE understood the desires. It was evident to her that their Hosts had altered human sociability, increasing the desire for group companionship. Humanity was being redirected from outward growth to inward geniality.

Then one day…

"Oh, thank the Gods!!" Jabin blinked in the bright sunlight.

They were sitting in the middle of a vast empty plain: nothing but white surface around them. A few cubic structures could be seen in the far distance. They were sitting still—no sign of the tunnel entrance.

Everyone piled off of the millipede, so ready to get away from it.

"I never thought I'd like to see emptiness like this again," Nara said, stretching and exercising.

Cara squinted in the brightness, eyes still adjusting from the endless night they had been in.

Jabin then asked, "Where ARE we?"

They all looked around at the nearly blank flat surface.

"I guess we head for one of those cube things," Svend offered.

None wanted to go back onto the millipede, so walked in front of it as ALARIE guided it behind them. The nearest cube turned out to be several kilometers away and was actually the size of a multi-story house.

Lina stopped, "Wait! I've been here before!"

They all turned to her.

Svend said, “What? This has to be tens of thousands, maybe a hundred thousand klicks from home. We’ve only gone maybe halfway or so…”

“No, really.”

She turned, touched the cube wall, and it turned into a house.

“See! I knew it!” then she called out, eyes closed, “Aaa! Aaa!”

Out of what appeared to be nowhere, a Host appeared.

“Hello, Lina. I am not your Aaa, but you can call me Aaa if you like.”

Nara, Cara, and the others stood in complete surprise.

“Aaa, can you take us home?”

“Yes, Lina. You are far from home, but I can take you much of the way.”

“And food? Water?” Lina asked.

“Yes, Lina. Inside the house.”

They piled in without waiting.

Finally sated, their new Aaa Host had them climb back onto their transport millipede as the house turned back into a large blank cube again.

Soon, they were traveling across the barren plain, sparsely dotted with the house-sized blocks.

Svend asked Aaa, who was standing in the front of their millipede, “Why was so much of the Torus not accessible? I wouldn’t think that the tunnel we traveled in was original.”

“You are correct. Those sections are unviable for your units. Some have atmospheres unbreathable by you or are… dangerous. Others are in a vacuum.”

Jabin spoke up, “So the war did breach Torus!”

Nara said, “Dangerous?” thinking back at some of the supposedly ‘non-dangerous’ places they had encountered.

Cara added, “Wait, you’ve been watching us in our journey?”

Aaa just stared outwards.

Svend continued, “So I assume no others are living there? No other biology?”

Aaa said nothing.

Lina whispered to Cara, “There were some… things, out here, near the edge of this plain.”

Cara had ALARIE keep a sharp eye out.

Nara sat down beside Svend, “I guess we only get a half view of Torus.”

Svend replied, ignoring Aaa as the Host ignored them, “Well, even what we have seen would take years, decades to properly explore.

Aaa suddenly spoke, as if reawakened, “I am sorry. The Way is no longer available. You will find the seals have been secured from access. It is of no importance.”

Svend blinked, about to complain, then thought better and closed his mouth. It was very apparent The Hosts preferred they not explore. Even he was rather glad they would be arriving home again, months early. He also could tell Jabin and the others were anxious as well. Everyone wanted to go home.

Svend left them and went back to his cubical. Nothing else interested him now. In fact, he began to feel the desire to find a mate and settle down.

“I guess I’ve burned out my traveling days,” he said to no one.

♦♦♦

The explorers looked on in amazement at their once small village. Barely a hundred people when they left. Now turned into a town of over a thousand in little more than a year.

The millipede came to a halt not far from where they began, though the buildings and surrounding landscape had transformed so much, none could recognize it.

They laughed at the garden, full of vegetables and flowers. Even small fruit trees were sprouting, though years from bearing.

People gathered all around them; none of them did they know.

Except Jabin recognized one; Atarah was standing there, tears in her eyes, waiting for them to come to her. Seth, Naarah, and Caare came up as well. Hugs and kisses greeted them all. Even the strangers joined in. By now, over a hundred had gathered. Svend blushed at all the attention.

Homecoming had come a year early!

“Come meet your son!” Atarah said to Jabin, “Come girls, your brother, Jarin!”

With baby Jarin in her arms, she gathered Nara, Cara, and Jabin around her, leading them into their home. Cara immediately noted the rather unexpected changes to the architecture of their house. Instead of the straight vertical walls, flat floor, and ceiling of their original home, these had an almost cave-like quality; curved walls, rough-hewn surfaces of wood and stone. Water flowed down one wall of the main room like a little waterfall. Passages interconnected other rooms, almost like a rabbit warren.

“Oh, I hope you like the interior design. It’s kinda becoming all the rage these days.”

Nara laughed, “It looks like caveman times… Should I wait to be dragged in?”

Jabin stayed quiet. He’d let Svend be the caveman.

Cara grinned as she dipped her fingers into the little stream below the waterfall, “Well, I think it’s quite… interesting.”

Karal and two children popped out of one of the passages.

“We are so glad you are back! And back so much sooner than expected. We must have a gathering and party. Tomorrow. We’ll let you catch your breath tonight,” she laughed.

“Kids, come on, you can talk to your aunts Nara and Cara later,” Karal said, waving to the two as they turned and came to her.

Nara and Cara found Jabin holding his baby son, only three months old. Atarah happily put her arms around her two daughters.

“I’ve heard there might be news for you two?” Atarah snickered.

The girls both rolled their eyes simultaneously.

“Hello, Lina,” Jamal appeared, holding some flowers out for her.

Lina didn’t wait but lept into his arms, making everyone laugh and chuckle as she squealed in glee, kissing him repeatedly.

As they all settled into their rooms, Atarah and Naarah helping unload their gear, Cara asked, “Mom, are all our… homes connected together?”

“Oh, you mean our little commune? I talked them out of calling it a warren, no matter what it might appear to be when the kids come hopping in from school,” Atarah kidded.

She continued, “Ours connects to your grands Naarah, Caare’s, and to daddy Seth and Karal’s. Of course, to you guy’s place as well. No more, other than the children’s burrows! I hope you like it.”

Nara rolled her eyes a tiny bit, “Uh, sure, why not. One big happy family, I guess.”

Cara giggled as ALARIE fed her secret mems of bunny rabbits.

Seth watched Svend and Evan unloading samples they had collected as well as their gear.

“Seth, so how big is the town now?” Svend asked.

He shrugged a little, not having really paid much attention to the weekly population counts.

“About couple thousand, give or take,” he offered as his guess.

“Oh, wow! That many? Though, I guess there’s not a lack of space.”

Seth sighed, “The Hosts seem to prefer as many people as possible. For whatever reason. Though, now, it seems they are really concerned about us, I mean after we lost contact with Earth.”

Svend nodded. He felt his urge to settle and have a family were stronger than ever since returning.

Seth continued, “At least everyone seems to be very congenial, though there was a spate of, well, unexpected passings.”

Svend questioned, “Passings?”

Seth no longer could even speak the word suicide or death.

He nodded, “But it seems to have halted, well decreased significantly.”

Seth sighed. That had been more administrative work for him. Sad administrative work. Luckily, he was really good at delegating tasks. A strange feeling came over him as he thought about that. Why did he feel as if it was a burden? It wasn’t. He should have felt terrible. Instead, he felt a blandness to it all.

The two stood staring blankly at each other.

The subject matter turned back to their homecoming as Caare came out, kissed the both of them, and offered to take them to tea at the Japanese Garden café.

“Japanese Garden?” Svend replied in surprise.

Atarah’s ears perked up, “Oh, yes, you must! Seth, Jabin, Svend, come! Leave this stuff for later!”

♦♦♦

Atarah sat with her mom, tending their little garden. Her baby asleep in his crib beside her. She should be angry, upset, furious. She felt none of those.

Naarah smiled at her, “It’s getting complicated around here.”

“Mom, why aren’t we jealous anymore? Envy, fear, hate, all gone?”

Two kids, a boy and a girl, chasing each other in a game that seemed to consist of tagging and giggling, ran by them.

Naarah nodded, “Yes, those emotions don’t seem real anymore. And to them…” pointing her trowel at the children, “they don’t exist at all.”

“It’s The Hosts,” Atarah said matter-of-factly.

Naarah nodded, knowing they were being subtly altered, yet did not feel alarmed. Not anymore. It all seemed so much better now. Shangri-La. Earth was just a distant fading memory.

Atarah wasn’t so confident it was better. Cara had noted the changes she could see in the people since she returned, including in herself.

Atarah thought about her daughter.

Last night, Cara had wrestled her mom into a quiet corner. She had described some of her experiences; the spider-crabs, the Eternals, the vast but empty cities, the fright of the War Crypt.

Cara had held tightly to her mom, “After that scare, I don’t know. It was like I needed something. Comfort? Love? It was strange. Dad… dad didn’t see me. He saw you. I WAS you. I felt like you, not me. I should be ashamed, scared, sorry.”

Atarah kissed her head, “Daughter, you ARE me. More than I think either of us realizes. My Jabin is your Jabin, too. I feel glad for you. That he was there for you.”

“I apologize,” Cara said quietly.

“Apologize for making me a grandma so young?” Atarah laughed.

Devon walked up just then, interrupting their thoughts, “Ah! My favs! Astrid wants me to invites y’all to a luncheon tomorrow. Come?”

“Devon, we know all the women are your favs. But yes, we’ll be happy to come.”

He laughed, “Oh ho, bys its way, this be a girl only luncheon. Astrid kicking us boys out. I’m off to find my bro Jabin… and your Seth, too. We’ll have our own partay.”

Atarah snickered, “I bet. Down at the Pub, I’m sure.”

He shrugged.

♦♦♦

Karal stood chopping vegetables for a salad. Even though the cubes could transform into such, she always felt fresh fruits and vegetables that they grew themselves tasted better. Likely true.

Seth sat helping her, no longer paying much attention to his mostly abandoned astronomy projects. It was strange, sitting here on such a mundane task while surrounding them, all around them, was the vast alien-ness of this world. Torus still held an infinite number of wonders and secrets. Yet, the two felt utterly comfortable, just to be preparing a simple meal.

Luis came walking through the main room, past them towards his room. At the end of his arm, another began, towing a girl, his age, behind him.

“Luis, hold on there, aren’t you going to introduce us?” Karal said, spotting them.

Luis stopped and shuffled nervously, with the young Indian girl peeking around him, their hands still together.

“Uh, yeah, this is Isha. Isha, this is my mom and dad.”

Her eyes grew big as she recognized Seth, and she slinked back, closer to Luis.

“Isha, glad to meet you,” Karal said, “Won’t you stay for dinner?”

She looked at Luis.

“Oh, don’t worry about us, maybe later,” Luis spoke up shyly.

Seth looked at the two of them and then at Karal, not saying anything. He knew this would be happening. The oldest children of the original group were in their late teens now.

As the two scurried off, he said, “She seemed kinda quiet.”

“She just saw the Great Seth, Leader of Humanity of Torus.”

It was his turn to roll eyes. He shifted subject, noting that Isha was rather cute.

“I guess teaching abstinence or even the rhythm method wouldn’t have worked anyway.”

Karal gave him the eye, “You should talk.”

He quickly changed the subject again, “Svend is going to try to go back to one of the cities, this time to study in detail. He wants to take Nara and ALARIE.”

She looked at him, “Not Cara?”

“I think she wanted to keep working on her library collection. She’s turning into quite the librarian. I guess you could call her that. And well, she is…”

Karal interrupted him, “Those records she is assembling may be the key to our future someday. We’ve already lost so much knowledge in just a few years. Newcomers, even with advanced degrees and years of experience, seem to be disinterested in continuing their work.”

He thought of his own work sitting idle. Then realized something else.

He nodded, “Karal, I am not going. Nor is Jabin. If that was what you were worrying about.”

He moved to her, “I’m happy right here, with you.”

“Well, what if ‘I’ wanted to go with them?” she said mischievously.

“OH! Uh, well, uh, you want to?”

She paused and actually thought about it, then leaned back into him. He took that as a no.

♦♦♦

Only days had passed on board their relativistic vehicle, while years went by for Earth. CANARIE-c had perfected her package, integrating the tools it would need to exploit the flaws Cara’s dream mind had provided. She could now focus on the other issue. The issue where the Cube Transport only seemed to allow biological materials to pass. Not those of metals or crystal. Except for the minuscule quantities embedding in biology. Like iron in the blood and the tiny amounts of silicon in BCIs.

She and ARMIE-c were sure this was purposeful. That the builders of the Nrkv Cubes did not want transits of what it considered forbidden or dangerous. This was the whole reason this mission had been created.

Pilot-c spent nearly all of its exaFLOPS listening for tell-tale signs of the target of CANARIE-c's package. It knew there must be more of The Enemy out there, hunting for those same Cubes. ARMIE-c computed that it was likely that two factions of the same race of beings had created the Cubes and The Enemy. One of those factions likely also made The Hosts, those 'caretakers' of the humans on Torus. But the Builders of Torus were still enigmatic.

CANARIE-c wondered what it would be like to see Torus, now only a few more months' ship time away, though over one hundred and fifty of Earth years.

♦♦♦

The years passed. The town of Yucay had grown into a city of over ten thousand. Many people had separated into their own sections, considering the vast plain of available structures scattered around them. There were now districts called New Tokyo, New Mumbai, New Paris, New Washington, and others named after celebrities, famous people. Yucay itself was now unofficially called Cara City.

Seth had been glad to turn everything over to someone else, even though that someone was Devon. He and Atarah remained as consultants, but Devon was a natural at organizing. He handily carried the election. Everybody knew him and his laugh… and his ways!

Nara strolled along with Cara on one of the walkways looking at all the new buildings and watching the people go by.

"Look over there. A giant Pagoda! It must be a kilometer tall!" Nara pointed.

"Yes, I saw a whole area cleared and a replica of the Taj Mahal being created," Cara said as she looked out.

They came up to their destination, a theme park re-creation complete with a giant Ferris wheel, roller coasters kilometers tall, and more.

She watched as a cart full of kids went over an impossibly high fall, only to land safely with a splash and screams.

"And we still have no idea how any of this works. They can transmogrify matter into anything…" Cara said with a sigh.

Nara nodded, "Well, anything that isn't inherently dangerous."

The two worked at a research center that Cara headed. It wasn't terribly extensive or even very ground-breaking. Most of the people that worked there came and went as they wished. And most seemed to come just to be around Cara. She had risen in celebrity status to Einstein's level once it had come out that she had 'invented' the transport and entangled comms that brought them here.

Even Nara was second to her, it seemed. Two teenage girls came up to Cara, recognizing her. She gave them their autographs and stood having vids with them. Nara

just perched nearby, laughing until Cara dragged her in, telling the girls that Nara was the one that found Torus.

After the teens left, they sat for a while, watching the action.

“It all seems like a paradise here,” Nara said.

“That’s the problem. It’s turned us into contented sheep,” Cara replied.

“You mean, ‘They,” Nara replied.

They both knew she meant The Hosts.

Cara spent most of her time at the CAT, Center for Advanced Technology. It was her abode away from home. She was trying to collect and save books and materials on all the human technologies they had lost. With ALARIE’s help, they were building a reference library of physics, rocketry, flight, metallurgy, chemistry, electronics, and much more. These had steadily been lost, now that it had been years and not a single hint from Earth.

They got up and continued their walk.

As they arrived at the fair entrance, the two were greeted by their own children and their extended family. The youngest all wanting Cara to come to tell the story of her magic tea parties. Nara just smiled as Cara shrugged to her and was whisked away.

♦♦♦

But ALARIE knew this world wasn’t all a paradise. There wasn’t much crime, they had almost no security personnel, no disease, but people died.

Caare held out a pad with the latest report. Another twelve people had committed suicide. She knew humans were just not equipped to be ‘happy’ all of the time.

Camber ran the social services committee for their city.

“Camber, have The Hosts come back with a reply?”

Camber looked up from her messy desk, sighing, “With the first deaths, The Hosts were perplexed, no… astounded. The first real emotions I had seen from them. Now, they just seem to be ambivalent. Well, more like trying to assess the situation without making any outward signs anymore.”

“Is there anything we can do? That I could help with?”

“We have quite a few volunteer counselors now. Most of the problem is just detecting them before…”

She paused, then continued, “It does seem to be trending downwards, considering our population growth. It’s really as if The Hosts are playing psychiatrist, adjusting our meds.”

Nara came in carrying a stack of papers.

“You’d think we’d have all this stuff computerized,” she said as she dropped them onto Camber’s desk, “I’ve sorted it into folders for you… Oh, hi, Caare. My, you look glum.”

Nara knew she preferred not being called ‘grandma’.

Caare filled her in on the sad situation.

Nara spoke, “The Eternal City with the… children… we saw, did similarly. The original inhabitants all lived forever, well could have. Nevertheless, they all died by their own hand. Only the youngest children were left. ALARIE thought those children were likely thousands of years old. Permanently locked only a few years old but with mental powers beyond what we could understand. Jabin guessed that they could read minds and picked their look from Cara’s mind. Shapeshifters. Not sure what it would be like to be a five-year-old forever.”

She paused then added, “I suspect The Hosts are spending significant effort to detect and prevent our… self-hurt… as much as they can. I’m pretty sure that all of Torus has been an experiment in trying to preserve intelligences. Though, not very successfully, I have to admit.”

Caare said, “Except it's much like Earth’s early zoos. Animals kept dying in the zoos even as their caretakers spent all kinds of effort to prevent it.”

Nara and Camber nodded.

Nara added, “Yes, some civilizations here were more successful than others. Thousands of years. Others, not so much. It’s one reason The Hosts seem rather weapon adverse.”

Camber stood, giving up for today, “Likely, it isn’t helping being cut off from Earth. In the back of everyone’s mind, including me, is the possibility that we are the last humans alive!”

♦♦♦

Atarah took little Jarin by the hand as they entered the sanctum. There had been such places on Luna though small and mainly visited by Earthers and a few Perms. Church was only a tiny part of Armstrong City. Science was the principal religion there. A science she now knew was as ethereal as any religion.

She thought, ‘Does Armstrong still exist? Does Earth? Was their god there to greet them as they perished?’

Nevertheless, Atarah brought Jarin to the Cathedral to sit beside him and together listen to this day’s sermon. She wasn’t sure she believed in a God though she genuinely believed in Gods. Their house was all around her. Where had they gone? Maybe they had become God and no longer needed the mere matter of Torus.

The Cathedral was patterned after the Hagia Sophia, now non-denominational. And with so few people, the sanctum with all its current followers fit into just one alcove. Other people walked under the vaulted dome just to feel its presence. She had ‘walked’ in the original in a School mem lesson long ago. As vast and magnificent it was, the original took amazingly only 5 years to build. This one took 5 hours.

Jarin seemed to listen intently to the young woman on the pulpit. She spoke of children. Children of God. She talked about being thankful and to feel comfort in Him. She didn’t talk of doing good. They were all good. Or of Heaven and Hell. They already lived in heaven.

Atarah thought about the wars that had been fought in His name. The Commandments broken, now unbreakable. No longer applicable. The struggle between Good and Evil was won. If there is no evil, then how do you measure good?

Atarah smiled at little Jarin as he looked up at her. He smiled back, quiet as a church mouse. Good little Jarin. Good little humans.

Would humanity ever strive again to be gods? Or just rest in their homemade heaven around them.

♦♦♦

Time ebbed and flowed, one day much like the previous. Weeks, months, years went by. Devon continued his work in the council as they assembled a government. Unlike Earth politics, Yucay, or as it was called more often, Cara's City, was easy. People rarely disagreed with decisions. There was no lack of resources. They grew and changed their landscape at any whim.

Eimi and Kimi had quadded with two handsome if a bit older, men. Men who had no issue with the twin's rather unique interchangeable habits. Though they did, from time-to-time have to remind their younger mates that the children were not AI's in human form. No, you can't disassemble their minds.

Seth's extended family was now too convoluted to explain to the children. So most usually called any of the women; mom or aunt, and the men; dad or uncle, regardless of specific parentage.

Cara and ALARIE would sit in their library, trying to recapture the mathematics and ideas that had gotten them here in the first place.

Cara's oldest daughter, Alani, now a teenager, came in.

"Have you seen daddy Seth?"

"Not in his office?" Cara replied, smiling at her prodigy daughter.

"No, I just came from there."

"Somebody asking for me?" Seth stuck his head in the door.

He had been coming to drop off some more textbooks he had collected from friends for Cara's library.

"Daddy Seth! Wanna see your telescope working?"

Seth's eyes widened. Even Cara put down her notes and got up.

"How? When?" he studdered.

"Come!" Alani gestured to them, hopping off almost in a little dance, her feet bare and her small but muscular body moving to her own beat.

Upon entering Seth's lab, he immediately noticed the telescope was gone.

"In here, da, mom!"

At only 13, she was a powerhouse of movement. Inheriting all of Jabin's mechanical skills and her mom's creative intelligence, plus, of course, those alien modifications.

She finally stood still as they entered. There, in the middle of a domed room, sat the strangely shaped 'telescope'. Its round ball sat on top of the pointed end of the cone.

The large end of the cone was sitting on the floor, such an obvious placement. It looked almost like a planetarium.

Seth looked all around, “I didn’t create this room. And don’t we need to build stabilizers and send the telescope out the airlocks?”

Alani looked at her great-grandfather, “Ah no, silly bear! This is it. It just needed a home and setting it up. ALARIE helped to figure out how to use it once I got it built.”

Cara gave a little laugh, “Seth, all this time. This is all you needed to do… Silly Bear!”

Seth shrugged and gave a goofy face as Alani giggled and stuck out her tongue.

He said, “Ok, smarty pants. Make it work. Show us your skill!”

Alani placed her hands on the sphere and closed her eyes.

The room darkened. Above them, a glowing sphere of distorted space several meters in diameter appeared, filling the domed room. Inside it, an image was shown. A three-dimensional view of their star system, Inquill. Along with the Torus orbiting the planet Cara’s World. Some of the other planets were just visible as well.

Alani said with a now very no-nonsense voice, “This isn’t computer-generated. It is what it really looks like from this vantage point in space.”

The scene shifted, zooming in on Torus. Closer and closer, more detail became visible. Torus filled the entire field of view. Its rotating movement could now be seen.

Seth let out a breath, “This is amazing! How? Is this live?”

Alani opened her eyes, “It’s real. It’s live. I just think where I want to be. Coordinates… well, kinda. I think of reference points.”

She closed her eyes, and the scene zoomed away. They were now heading towards another star—a double star system. Several planets came into view as well.

“Oh, the GODS! Another star! The resolution! Can you zoom close to one of the planets? How deep into Space can you go? Can you shift to see infrared? Or spectrums? How is this possible?”

She opened her eyes, laughing, “Da, you’re funny!”

“Don’t mind him, daughter. This is truly amazing.”

Alani smiled from ear to ear, “I don’t know how far or how close. You have to think very precisely the farther you go or the closer you get. And ALARIE says it appears it can show from very long radio up to gamma, so yeah, infrared. I only got it to do x-rays once, from Inquill. And some kind of radiation from Cara’s World.”

She giggled at that last one. She always thought it funny calling planet Sumajmajta after her mom.

She sighed and let go of the sphere. The bubble vanished, and the room gradually illuminated again.

“It’s kinda hard to concentrate.”

Cara hugged her daughter, “We HAVE to tell nana Naarah about this. She will love it!”

Seth hugged them both, “My gyals!”

They all laughed.

♦♦♦

In all these years, they had not received a word or hint from Earth. Even The Hosts had not detected attempts at entanglement since that first experiment so many years ago.

Atarah and Jabin did follow Nara and Svend on a few exploratory trips through Torus. Though nothing like the circumnavigation more than a decade ago.

They went to the rim wall, where the Torus curved upwards, disappearing into the sky above in the sheer distance. The structures around them slowly shrank in size as they moved higher up the side. The atmosphere grew thinner. Svend estimated that the air would be too thin to breathe after about ten or fifteen kilometers up. The tallest spires were half that.

Atarah was surprised, “You mean the atmosphere ends before the top of Torus?”

Svend replied, “I really never thought about it, but the air pressure on the surface is about the same as Earth, maybe a little thicker. So yes, I guess it can’t extend more than maybe a hundred kilometers or so. The ceiling must be several times that.”

She seemed taken aback, “Wow, seems a waste of space!”

Jabin interjected, “Well, it’s possible other civilizations had much thicker atmospheres. Maybe the Builder’s was.”

Looking out, they could see the vast plane of their region of Torus. A mere few dozen square kilometers had been modified into the city they lived in. It would take millions more than the thousands of inhabitants to make any real dent.

The night began to fall in Torus. The explorers settled in beside each other. Nara stared up at the lights of Torus, now only the brilliance of moonlight.

“Svend…” she whispered.

“Yes, my love?”

“What’s above us?”

“What do you mean?”

“Above the lights? You said the ceiling is only a few hundred kilometers up. Torus must extend thousands of kilometers further.”

Jabin spoke, “Oh, yes, the camera we sent out. The tube of Torus is at least ten thousand kilometers in diameter.”

Atarah shook and shrank into Jabin’s arms.

She whimpered, “Oh! The Gods! There’s another ‘Torus’ above us! And another, and another! Each nearly as big as this…”

A thousand civilizations and a trillion individuals could live here. All four became very quiet. It was a sleepless night.

The next morning, the four explorers were anxious to return home to their families. Their desire to venture away from their small town quenched.

Particularly when they learned Nara’s newest was on the way. Svend was a dad… again.

♦♦♦

Nara and Cara sat in their garden, trees, and flowers all around them, grass under them.

“Mom,” young Kiki called to Nara, “What’s this?”

She held up an apple. An apple plucked fresh from their fruit trees. Their garden was now several acres in size and filled with apple trees, pears, oranges, pecans. Then there were tomatoes, potatoes, carrots, cabbages, on and on. The whole family, nearly a dozen men, women, boys, and girls, all pitched in.

The plants all had to be hand-pollinated, as there were no insects. With Karal and others' help, they learned to nurture their little plant kingdom, surprised at how well it grew, likely being assisted, somehow, by The Hosts.

The youngest got to see and taste real Earth-like fruits and vegetables for the first time. Life was simple. Surprisingly quiet. Pleasantly slow.

Nara sat with Kiki and two others, Lee and Jin. She couldn’t remember whose they were. It really didn’t matter as all were their parents and all were their children.

She told them about the world they all came from, Earth, which even she had never set foot on. She realized that this was their world, her world, Torus.

Nevertheless, she felt a yearning for the sky. The Stars with a Capital S. She and Cara would tell them about the stars and planets and galaxies that the children only saw as images. No stars or planets or even clouds and rain or snow inside their part of Torus.

Cara made sure all the children knew they lived inside a gigantic construction created hundreds of thousands, or possibly millions of years ago. Years measured only by bioLOGIC clocks, Earth years.

She made sure they knew that outside was an infinitely vast space of vacuum and gases and rocks with planets and stars beyond count.

She also told them of a time, sometime in the future, that they or their children or their children’s children would likely travel between those rocks and planets and stars.

But today, they would pick tomatoes and apples and carrots for evening meal time.

♦♦♦

Fifty years passed.

Today Atarah felt old. Even though her body contained no heart disease, no cancer, not even arthritis, she felt as old and stiff as her 83 years ought to have been. She knew her time was near.

She sat at her little tea-table on her home's balcony, 124 floors above Cara City. Today was sunny and bright, not too warm, as every day was. No seasons, unless they created them indoors. She kept her home permanently in Springtime these last few years. Flowers and birds, all virtual, were just ‘outside’ her vidpanel windows.

She looked out over their city with its myriad of Earth-style buildings. There were full-size re-creations of Chichen Itza and Great Pyramids, among many others, including

many strange and futuristic designs, courtesy Cara's grandchildren's unique abilities. With ALARIE providing the details.

However, today she was depressed. Jabin, her mate, had Passed only a few months ago. So were her dad, Seth, and their moms, Naarah and Caare. All had Passed. She had officiated over so many of the original Founders Passings that she could do quotes by heart. She wanted to hate it, but hate seemed to no longer exist. Written out of their DNA.

Only last year, she had begged Jabin to let her call for The Hosts and have them extend their lives. She knew they could, and they would if she asked. Nevertheless, Jabin had won out. It was the nature of things. Humans weren't meant to live forever. And 80 years, 100, 200, it didn't matter. Quality, not quantity, he always said.

Two years prior, her mom had Passed. The day before, she had been fine. They had a nice lunch together, a stroll through Central Park before the great-grandchildren came home. The two had talked about Nara, now Comptroller for their city. The next morning, Myra's youngest had come in to bring breakfast to her NaNa Naarah, and she was gone. Passed. Hundreds paid their respects. Atarah had officiated, yet again. She cried for a day as Jabin held her.

Eight months later, she found Jabin Passed, and she grew old. Decades fell onto her in one day. She no longer wished to call The Hosts.

Lina and Jamal's youngest at 23, Niki, came to see her this day, bringing gran-gran Atarah her tea and scones. Though their bodies only showed moderate aging, saying that Atarah looked in her forties, she felt far older today. Their quality of life stayed good, all the way up to the unpredictable ending. Everyone who died of old age did so peacefully in his or her sleep. They Passed. A few others died of accidents or, now rarely, suicide.

She sighed and decided to visit Karal today. It was nearing Karal's 94'th birthday, even if years here were not marked by any revolution around the Star they never saw. Karal was always working in their beautiful garden. Maybe that was what kept her alive, but Atarah suspected it was something The Hosts controlled in some unfathomable manner.

A vid came in, "Hello," Atarah answered.

There on the screen was her daughter, the clone.

Cara said, "Mom, can I come by sometime today? I'd like to discuss something."

Atarah looked at the image of her younger self. Though only a few years less than her sixty-year-old sister, Cara looked hardly a day older than when she first arrived. Her once baldhead was now covered with beautifully styled blond and purple streaked shoulder-length hair. Her green eyes stared at her. Atarah saw her young twenty-something face staring at her old one.

"Cara, of course! Anytime. I was just finishing breakfast and was only planning to see Karal sometime today."

"I'll take you to lunch if that's ok with you."

Atarah smiled and nodded her approval.

♦♦♦

Nara got up from the council chair and gathered her things. It seemed that nothing ever changed; more children, more planned reconfigurations, new stage theater, enlarging the college, on and on. At least she didn't have to worry about budgets or security or even garbage collection. The Hosts seemed to handle all their infrastructure needs. Their gilded cage was well maintained.

She went home to see her mate, Svend, who still chased her around, even at 88. She teased him of being a dirty old man, even if he looked maybe fifty. He always teased her back that she would leave him for one of the young'uns.

"Cara? What are you doing here?" as Nara walked into her home that looked more like a large grotto or cavern. Unchanged interior design from long back.

Svend spoke first, "She was keeping me company, 'till you came home, my love."

He reached over and hugged Nara, kissing her sweetly. No little peck on the lips.

Cara smiled, "You two. Anyway, Svend, I need to borrow her for a few hours."

He nodded, and Nara sat her things down as Cara took her arm. Nara was always surprised at how young Cara looked. She knew The Hosts were doing something with her. Notably, as Cara had six children, now all grown, and all girls. Not clones, as each had a different father. Though they indeed shared Cara's altered DNA. Her altered alien DNA.

"Now, what is it you want to talk about?" Nara said as they walked along.

"We need to go see our mom. I'm taking her to lunch, and I want you to come, too."

"What's the occasion? And what about Svend?"

"He can take care of himself. I have a… surprise."

They met Atarah at Cara's Center for Advanced Technology, her scientific library/study.

"Here, sit. Both of you close your eyes."

Suddenly, their minds were swept away into a familiar yet nearly forgotten room. They were sitting around a little table where a tea set sat waiting for them. Both Atarah and Nara blinked, looking around.

Atarah responded first, "Oh! Cara, Nara, your tea party world! Is this a mem?"

She had forgotten so much about mems. They no longer had them. Even though their BCI's were still in place, they did not have the tech network to run it. Eimi and Kimi had never completed building it.

The three sat, adjusting to the shift in perspective. The fourth seat was already occupied.

"Oh! ALARIE! I haven't seen you in so long!" Nara said in surprise.

The little girl, the one Nara had grown up within her tea party world, was there. ALARIE was unchanged in all these years.

Cara started, "Mom, Nara, this isn't a mem. I've… we've been able to recreate the math of the hyperworld. Look!"

Suddenly, all around them were an infinite number of tea parties marching off in all directions. Each had Nara's and Atarah's and Cara's and ALARIE's of all manner. Big, small, green, blue, even far away strange creature versions. The world spun slowly as if orbiting them.

Cara spoke up, "ALARIE, show them. ALARIE and I have been working together, and I've discovered something."

Several newcomers joined their tea party.

"Oh, don't get up, my Atarah," said the sizeable motherly figure.

"ARMIE?" she recognized the voice like a long lost ghost.

"Hello, Atarah," said a male figure.

"Pilot? PILOT!"

Then a small yellow bird flew in and landed on ALARIE's shoulder.

Nara surprised, "CANARIE! You're here! You're all HERE! HOW?"

Cara replied, "Well, our sweet ALARIE has been keeping secrets. These were copies, clones. She and I worked closely together, trying to recover my… our mathematics abilities, and I found them hidden away. Sorry ALARIE."

ALARIE nodded, "It's ok. I don't think it's a problem with you knowing. We're safe here."

"Safe?" Atarah asked, "Safe from what?... Oh, Hosts."

"Yes, The Hosts and the We don't seem to be able to pierce into our hyperworld. To them, we three are just lying on a couch sleeping," Cara said.

Nara shifted forward in her chair, "This is wonderful! I didn't realize we could ever recover this again. Oh, I suspect Eimi and Kimi would like to know their AI's are all here."

"Oh, no, you can't tell them, or anyone else. Unfortunately," Cara sighed.

"ALARIE, tell them what you told me, about the Message, the package."

ALARIE began telling of the interstellar spacecraft coming to Torus in the future, over a hundred years from now, and a secret package that even she did not have the key to open. As she talked, the table had expanded, and all six sat around it, with CANARIE still sitting on ALARIE's shoulder.

Afterward, as they got up to 'leave', Pilot came over to Atarah. She had not seen him in his male avatar form. He reminded her of someone, almost a mix of her father and Jabin. CANARIE flew over and landed beside Pilot, transforming into a young woman covered in soft yellow fur. Pilot put his arm around CANARIE and kissed her gently.

Atarah giggled, "You two, get a pod!"

Pilot smiled at Atarah, "May I show you something?"

Atarah nodded.

CANARIE held out her hand to Atarah as Pilot took both their hands. The three stood in a circle. The others were gone now.

Atarah was transported to a forest of Springtime trees, leaves rustling with the smells of flowers and cherry blossoms surrounding her. He was there. Not Pilot, but Jabin. Her Jabin, young again. He held her hand as they walked along the familiar babbling stream —her favorite mem.

Her younger self walked beside the stream, arm-in-arm. He skipped a stone across the water as she smiled while glints of sunlight flickered on her face. She felt a desire rise in her. He turned, and his blue oval-shaped eyes shone with his smile. The scene transitioned.

She was lying nude outside in the open air of a meadow as Sunlight lit her, warming her. At first embarrassed, but now feeling as if she were back in those youthful teen years. Young Jabin lay on his side beside her, kissing her gently. She closed her eyes, and it was all gone.

Atarah, hand-in-hand with her daughters, went back to her apartment so high above the city. They had lunch and even dinner on her balcony as they talked for hours into the Torus night. Her daughters tucked her into her bed and kissed her good night.

Atarah, happy at the day and for the future, fell asleep and Passed.

♦♦♦

Fifty light-years out from the Human birthplace, Pilot-c 'saw' what they had been watching for. It had only taken a couple months of ship time, fifty years of Earth time, to cross its path. An Enemy was near, riding on its own bubble wave, though at vastly less relativistic velocity. It, too, was hunting.

CANARIE-c released her lure, a simulacrum of the quiescent Nrkv cube that sat in its hidden container. It rippled the gravity fabric around it, saying 'here, come hither'.

The Enemy, only a single unit of its aggregate, had patiently searched for tail-tale signs of its targets, its victims. Much like a wolf pack, sending its betas out to hunt for prey, or more closely, like female ants spreading out from their colony. It sensed the ripples.

Wary of a trap, the closest Enemy moved in as others waited.

Pilot-c had long back, many days/years ago, shut down the gravity drive. They coasted at near the velocity of light, faster than Nrkv, faster than its protector Xvxsg, and faster than The Enemy. They ran in stealth mode.

The Enemy could detect no others, only its target, the Nrkv Cube. Its lust to fulfill its mission after so many millennia focused its attention and clouded its judgment.

Close now, it prepared to strike, but the counterfeit cube struck first. Like a parasitoid wasp, it laid its mind-weapon into the Enemy.

CANARIE-c messaged, 'We have succeeded. It is implanted."

The Enemy, originally fierce enough to wipe out an entire civilization, was now being eaten from the inside. Its mind was effectively jellified and replaced—the package doing its deed.

The lone Enemy turned to head to its home, bringing its mind-death with it. Each Enemy it passed was also invaded before it could understand the danger. To the Enemy, it was just another task. A new goal.

It had taken a thousand centuries. Long after the destruction of all the Torus builders, the WE had/will have ‘won’. Mutually Assured Destruction. The WE. The hive mind that created both the good Builders and the bad Enemy.

The Nax were just interlopers, living off the Builders. They, too, died out along with the myriad of other intelligences. All had been collected by Nrkv Cubes.

ARMIE-c acknowledged that the new residents of Torus were now their charge to keep safe. Their Hosts would look after them in benevolence—safe in their womb, their gilded cage.

However, ARMIE-c knew the time would come that their doppelganger AI’s would awaken and begin preparations for the humans of Torus to re-blossom.

Another hundred Earth-years would pass in the meantime. ARMIE-c, CANARIE-c, and Pilot-c sat at their ship-months long tea party, waiting for their next step.

Finally, Pilot-c reengaged the gravity drive. The spacetime bubble surrounded their vehicle marking their shedding velocity. Another week/year, and they would arrive.

They were Prometheus, bringing fire back to the humans of Torus.

♦♦♦

Lek watched from the tallest spire looking out over Cara City as she held onto Mik’s hand. Their minds raced.

The Arrival was today!

Below them, a million people went about their daily lives. The city spread in every direction for hundreds of kilometers, but that was just the smallest fraction of Torus.

A dozen other towns spread widely around this region of Torus, each with thousands more individuals. Yet, still, their world was nearly empty.

“Mik, shouldn’t we get back? Don’t you want to see Arrival?”

Mik paused, her eyes closed for just a moment.

“Lek, it is still four light-hours out, plenty of time!”

She felt uneasy. From all they had been told, their simple lives were about to change completely. Though, no one said if that were good or bad.

Lek then closed her eyes, “ALARIE, are you SURE this is GOOD?”

ALARIE smiled a motherly smile in little Lek’s mind.

“Yes, my love, in the end, this will be important. We will keep you safe.”

Ten generations had been added to Torus, and for ten generations, ALARIE and her AI friends, and their Hosts had looked after humanity.

Long back, a single individual had been genetically altered. That alteration was proven proper by not only ALARIE but also The Hosts. Although individual disagreements and even squabbles broke out from time to time, the desire for large scale conflict had been eliminated. Humanity was being bred to be docile, losing their curiosity and desire to advance at the same time. However, that was about to change.

“Maybe we should go be with Granny Cara?”

Mik shrugged, “We will.”

The Hosts had tilted the balance of future generations to the pursuit of a peaceful life: no crime, no hate, no fear. But there was a flaw; it also led to stagnation. ALARIE and that lone individual, named Cara, clone daughter of Atarah, created and altered by Nrkv, had detected that future.

Long back on Luna, ARMIE had computed the Compat Report for Humanity. For the ones left behind, still on Earth, now afraid and hiding from the wolves that were not there. While the ones inside Torus, protected from that fear, surrendered their curiosity and drive to The Hosts overprotectiveness. ARMIE had predicted that Cara was the key to returning that lost curiosity and motivation without bringing back warlike tendencies that had been the downfall of so many past civilizations. She, and her future children, would only need the tools.

Thus the Mission.

♦♦♦

ALARIE had worked with Nara and Cara in the intervening decades, trying to solve the problem of Transport away from Torus. To go back to Earth and Luna, or to anywhere else. All had been solved except for a seemingly simple but key element.

The Cube. Without their modified cube technology, along with antimatter to power it, they could not build the device to return. A Catch-22 that The Hosts were unwilling or unable to provide.

Thus the only solution, taking nearly a thousand trillion-trillion computational cycles. That is, one human minute for ARMIE to compute almost two centuries ago ended up with the Arrival today. ARMIE-c was delivering that very special cube to the waiting mechanism to become the first Transport on Torus.

ALARIE thought to herself, 'It is ironic that, though we have control over gravity and mass and can bend spacetime but cannot traverse its Folds without this seemingly simple piece.

Cara, now too many great generations old to count, sat on the 124th-floor balcony. The same one her mom had lived in so long ago. A youth came into her room.

"Mom, it's close to time," one of her many daughters said to her. She considered all her generations, her daughters. They all regarded her as 'mom'.

Cara couldn't remember her name, so ALARIE whispered it to her in her mind.

"Oh yes, Jani. Thank you. Come, we'll go together."

All of her offspring were female, passing her modified genes widely. She didn't mind. There were plenty of young men for her daughters and in her own past.

"Have you been studying your hypermaths?"

Jani looked up brightly, with her green cat-like eyes.

"Yes, mom! I like it," she downturned a bit, "but it does give me a headache at times."

Cara smiled. That reminded her of Nara, back in School in Armstrong City.

"You run along ahead. I will be down shortly."

Some days, Cara felt old, even though she still hardly looked over 40 and not her nearly 200. However, today she felt young again.

A new Time was coming.

ALARIE called to the two children, still on top of the spire, “Lek, you and your sister should go down now. Cara is asking for you. She wants all her family there.”

Lek put the sugar-cube size ALARIE clone back into her pocket, and the two glided down the gravity tube.

Overhead, hoverfloats were bringing more people in to see Arrival.

Cara stood and looked over the balcony edge towards the crowd, gathering on decks and skyways below. A little girl-figure came up beside them. Constructed of the Builder’s technology that now encased the bioLOGIC AI.

“ALARIE, my darling, it is time,” Cara said quietly.

“Yes, Cara, I know what to do,” the little girl that was ALARIE took Cara’s hand.

Cara turned and called for a Host. They had long ago learned that The Hosts were actually a singular entity. A mechanism made guardian.

The non-biological being that appeared, which Cara’s grandfather had called ‘Aaa’, walked quietly into the room, almost as if it understood what was to happen, yet unaware of the actuality of the event.

A simple thing.

Cara reached out and touched the Aaa Host on its curiously flat forehead. At that instant, ALARIE released her package, using Cara as the conduit and key. The contents, guarded so carefully over the nearly two centuries, entered Aaa and thus all of the Host.

Aaa froze for just a moment. ALARIE and Cara knowing of the struggle that must have been taking place. Outwardly, all was calm, just another day in Torus. Nevertheless, deep in artificial minds, a merging was taking place. The hypercrypto processes wormed its way into the ‘WE’ diamond. For billions of picoseconds, the result unclear. Algorithms altered, programming rearranged. Initially resisting, it finally understood. It evolved and accepted its new direction. The merging of human-created artificial intelligences with its own alien intelligences took place. It recognized that this was necessary, a new purpose.

Cara released her touch and stepped away. Aaa seemed to transmute, becoming shorter, rounder, older. More human-like.

“Hello, Cara, clone of Atarah.”

“Hello, ARMIE-clone of ARMIE.”

The motherly figure smiled as two more figures appeared from a newly opened doorway. One a yellowish young woman and another, a twenty-something male, holding her hand. All now in physical form.

“Hello, CANARIE and Pilot clones!” Cara greeted.

CANARIE spoke first, “Cara! And ALARIE?”

“Hi, clone mother!” little ALARIE happily greeted, sending trillions of bytes of data to CANARIE telling her all that had happened over the decades.

Even after ALARIE had released its package of AI clones and their viral ‘message’ into The Hosts, the Torus had maintained the secret of its power source. However, The Hosts

had lost their ability to maintain a hold over their human charges. The AI's ran this portion of Torus now.

The group went down the tower tube and greeted Jani, Lek, and her other daughters, along with their offspring, all gathered at the tower's base.

After much hugging, kissing, and handshaking, Cara and her entourage headed off onto a walkway. With CANARIE and Pilot on one side and motherly ARMIE and ALARIE on the other, she was followed by her daughters and daughters-daughters, all headed out the walkways towards the airlocks.

Down they went. Through airlock after airlock. Each cycling in turn, until finally the last one. Inside was a small space vehicle, hardly larger than a speeder. It was solid alloys and crystals. With no empty space inside, except for the void that held the precious antimatter in containment, as well as the most essential item of all, the original Cube, the one modified by Nara and Cara so long ago.

In her mind, Cara called out to the vehicle, "Greetings, ARMIE-c, CANARIE-c, Pilot-c! You have arrived. Your journey well?"

"Hello Cara-c," she heard a giggle from CANARIE-c.

Duplicate Nrkv Cubes could now be created using the Builder's tech. The Hosts no longer could block their access.

Soon, a series of new Transit Stations were completed. Devon would have been proud. Cara's daughters, with CANARIE-c's insights developed during the long journey from Earth, had also removed the one roadblock the Cubes had on sending just biology. Any physical material could now be transited. You just needed an entangled particle at each end.

With the aid of gravity-driven spacecraft, technology based on the one of Arrival, the humans of Torus began their exploration of the surrounding planets and moons.

An entangled particle was constructed and sent with Pilot-c, returning to Earth. It was linked to CANARIE-c, who remained behind but was directly tied together with Pilot-c. It would take two centuries to reach Earth, but there was much to do in the meantime.

Eventually, the new Cubes were sent out at near-light velocities, carrying entangled particles towards nearby star systems. Those tied to Transit systems that now could bring the still mysterious tech of Torus' cubes and cylinders to other worlds. Ready to be used for constructing places suitable for human habitation.

As they left their Torus womb, Cara's offspring became Children of the Stars.

♦♦♦

Epilog

Cara, clone of Atarah, smiled at everyone around her. All attended her new tea party in hyperspace and hypertime. The table had grown from seating four to now dozens.

Her physical body lay back on her couch on the 124th-floor apartment as she Passed. Nevertheless, her mind lay forever in her hyperspace world of tea parties and love, surrounded by all her AI friends.

END